

Mistress

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Mistress

by [TheCuriousNumber5](#)

Summary

What was Tamriel like before Leovic got the boot?
How was life before the Soulburst?
What kind of person could put up with Abnur Tharn?
What kind would *want* to?

Private Study

2E 571 20th of Hearthfire

He should have been angry, or at the very least, *annoyed*. Not for the first time, upon entering his private study, Abnur Tharn found a particular youngish, dark-haired woman situated comfortably on the plush settee. Her shoes were off, feet tucked up beneath her. In her hands was a thick book, and on the end table was a small tray with an empty teacup, a matching pot, and a crumb littered saucer. She'd been in there a while, then; long enough that servants had brought her food. He glowered a tiny bit. And she'd been in there *often* enough that no one had thought to inform him!

Gratiaren Tiradia, she was the granddaughter of Silero Tiradia, Nibenay's Lord Governor. Her name meant *Grace*, which was what she went by, thinking it sounded less overtly Imperial. Her relationship with her heritage was complicated, after all, being half-Dunmer on her father's side. She was around mid thirty-something based on how long Tharn had known her. There was no telling her exact age; she would appear as a less-than-thirty-something Imperial for longer than most Imperials would even be alive.

"Am I *interrupting*?" There was a mildly irritated note in his tone, and he didn't break stride as he crossed the room to his desk.

"Well, I was just getting to a particularly good bit." She didn't look up from the book, unbothered by his arrival. She'd always been markedly unimpressed by *who* he was. And *what* he was! He wanted to be offended by her familiar and frequent intrusions of this space. *His* space.

The girl was a bloody menace.

But, despite his determination to dislike her, she *didn't* annoy him. Her behavior was unpredictable enough that she'd remained, at minimum, a curiosity for nearly two decades. And at most, well...

As usual, nothing had been touched on his desk. Grace always at least afforded him *that* much privacy during these *visits*. She marked her place with a piece of ribbon and closed the book. Bright green eyes fringed with dark lashes regarded him coolly.

"But it *is* your library." She put her feet down, slipping them back into the shoes.

"Is it? I was beginning to have my doubts. You seem to spend more time here than I do, despite my best efforts to keep people *out*."

"I hardly think those were your best efforts, Abnur." She made an unladylike sound of amusement.

He came forward and held out his hand. With mischief in her eyes, Grace passed him the book. It was an obscure text analyzing Calcelmo's Stone, and Tharn could count the people interested in such a thing on one hand. It contained full transcriptions of both the Falmer and Dwemeris engravings. There were comparisons of Falmer to Ayleidoon as well, which were used as the basis for translation. All things Dwemer were of great interest to her.

"Hm. Fascinating. You can read archaic Altmeri." A small bit of surprise slipped through in his voice. *He* hadn't even read that text yet. "Did it ever occur to you to perhaps *ask* to use the library rather than breaking through my wards?"

"Flimsy wards like that, it was practically an invitation, Lord Tharn." A smirk curled on her lips. He didn't *want* her in there, but there were worse intruders. In his mind, Gratiaren Tiradia was

equated with conflict. The internal kind.

He arched a brow at her formal address of him, though.

“*Abnur*.” She corrected. Last time he’d caught her in here, he’d told her she might as well address him as familiarly as she behaved toward his personal space. Why he’d made such a foolish remark, he had no idea.

“You presume much.” He scoffed, handing her back the book. There was something about how she looked gazing up at him like that, but he couldn’t put a finger on it. Odd girl. His expression remained carefully schooled, exuding his usual impassive, if not bored, countenance.

“Mmhm.”

“I’ve been speaking with your grandfather about you.” Casually, he strode to the side table where he uncorked a decanter of wine and poured two glasses. Though surprise flashed briefly across her face, she said nothing, waiting for him to continue. He handed her a glass. “I remarked upon your considerable, albeit wasted, abilities and suggested you might benefit from studying here and having closer access to the resources in the city.”

“Is that so?” Grace rose, her eyes narrowed at him. She was often inscrutable, but after being acquainted for so long, he knew which buttons to push, and delighted in doing so. The contents of her glass sloshed a little as she rolled its stem between her fingers. She didn’t like his comment.

“You occupy a prime social status and position, Grace, yet you lie about, achieving nothing.” Tharn made a dismissive gesture toward the book she’d been reading.

“*Lie about?*” There was something dangerous in the way she said it. Could he sufficiently prod that fiery temper before she wised up?

“You could be a valuable advisor. Or, had you completed your training, you might stand amongst some of the more capable battlemages.” Damn. He was trying too hard, she knew when she was being baited.

“The almighty Abnur Tharn does not, in fact, see *all*.” She narrowed her eyes further, suspicious, then took a sip of wine.

“No? What have you been up to, then, if not merely disappearing into texts and your own thoughts? What *use* are you to the Empire?” He looked down his nose at her, summoning his powers of verbal manipulation. “The court girls...”

“I have funded and assisted with the building and supplying of libraries and schools in the poorer villages of Cyrodiil. I have provided equipment and means of farming, sent food...” She stopped abruptly. Must be that she was a bit off her game. Or her mind was still occupied with the Dwemer. “You insufferable, cocksure bastard.”

“Such *language*, for a lady.” There was no stopping his smirk.

“Oh, that was *polite*, Abnur.” She did tend to pepper her vocabulary creatively with various expletives. With a feigned glare, she emptied her glass, and Tharn promptly refilled it. Her reservations receded when she drank; she got more interesting, the more wine she had. “You know full well what endeavors I take on for the people and the Empire.”

“Of course I do, but you are easy to provoke.” He almost laughed. “Nevertheless, you could do more.”

“And I suppose you’re going to *graciously* offer me the opportunity to?” She took another sip of wine, eyeing him warily. “Just how did my grandfather respond, anyway? I cannot imagine he was pleased.”

“He didn’t jump with joy.”

“Well, he doesn’t like that we are acquainted apart from him; and undoubtedly he thinks you’re up to something. Which, let’s be honest, you probably are.” She was not one to sugar-coat anything. It was an admirable quality. Most of the time.

“I didn’t think my reputation had sunk to the status of noblewomen needing to fear my intentions.” Tharn rolled his eyes.

“Wow, even *I* wasn’t insinuating anything as insidious as *that*.” Grace gave a laugh. “Though, if that’s the only dastardly reason you can come up with for having me close by, it doesn’t say much about your opinion of me.”

“Is sarcasm lost on you now? Perhaps I overestimated your intellect and appreciation of *wit*.” He gave her an icy stare that did nothing to raise her concern, and she laughed again.

“Please.” She scoffed. “It is no secret you keep *company* with professionals rather than dirtying your hands by sullyng the reputations of noble ladies.”

Tharn choked on his wine as Grace gave a nonchalant shrug, looking pleased that she’d shocked him. “I’d be surprised if my grandfather thought *my* innocence was in that sort of danger.”

“Wouldn’t that require possessing innocence in the first place?” He muttered and dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

“I suppose you’re right. I do spend a lot of gold in brothels.” The grin that spread across her face was positively diabolical, and he stared at her. She’d never been *quite* so forthcoming before. Maybe she’d already gotten into the wine before his arrival. “It’s more likely he’s concerned that you’re in the midst of some power plot. Which I find unlikely, seeing as you’re already Chancellor of the Elder Council. I suppose a worse option would be that you’re considering taking wife number *eight*.”

“Certainly not.” He almost coughed again.

“It’s been seven years since that vile bitch died. Tongues *do* wag; I heard it’s the longest you’ve ever been unmarried.” As always, Grace bared her opinions freely. To be fair, his late wife had been as ambitious as she was cruel and ruthless. Traits she’d passed readily to their daughter Clivia, who had also inherited Grace’s loathing, and not without cause.

“The number of social engagements I’m forced to attend has been cut down by more than half.” He shrugged. “I see no reason to add disturbances to the peace I have found by maintaining my status as a widower.”

“Well, I can’t fault you for that.” She hated parties as much as he did. “Anyway, what did my grandfather say? Did you ask his *permission* for me to study here?” She narrowed her eyes a little.

“Of course not, you’re not a child.” Tharn scoffed. “After turning several shades of puce, he said I’d best take the matter up with you directly.”

“He *does* know me.” She chuckled. “Disregard his suppositions of ulterior motives.”

“Have I ever concerned myself with the petty assumptions and speculation of others regarding my professional *or* personal lives?” He cocked a brow at her. “Do you accept the invitation or not?”

“Obviously, I cannot turn down the opportunity to have access to your library as well as the Imperial Archives. The vaults, too?” Grace gave him a hopeful look, and he nodded. There was a pause, her eyes were bright. “There are a great many things here full of valuable knowledge that I covet.” She looked demurely at the shelves of books. *Demure* was not how he would describe her. It wasn’t the first time an exchange of theirs had drifted into barely-veiled, potentially inappropriate territory. Wisely, he ignored it.

She was not terrible to look upon. Tharn always gave credit where credit was due, even when it came to aesthetics. Rarely had he seen her with any extra adornments: jewelry and the like. Her clothes, while fine, were not at all extravagant as would befit her station. Tharn sipped his wine, continuing his assessment. While tall for a woman, she was still shorter than he was.

The simple, claret dress she wore hugged her curves in a way he refused to acknowledge. Her long, rich brown hair was swept back and up, but its unruly nature allowed many tendrils to escape its bonds. Her large, green eyes were astute, and in contrast with the color of her dress, they seemed to stand out that much more. There were freckles smattered across her cheeks and nose over a very fair complexion.

Grace’s appearance didn’t tick all the boxes for *conventional* beauty, the contrived type that court ladies wanted to achieve. But, *that* sort of aesthetic did little to rouse him. He’d bedded plenty of *conventionally* beautiful women, usually prostitutes, but very few that he thought genuinely lovely.

“Abnur, if you stare any harder, you’re going to pop a blood vessel.” Her voice pulled him from his thoughts, and he glared at her at once.

“Rest assured that the direction of my gaze has *little* to do with what I’m thinking.”

“Mmhm.” She wasn’t convinced. “So, I *am* very interested in making use of your library and the archives. If you truly offer your hospitality to provide such access, then, of course, I gratefully accept.” Tharn gave no outward reaction at all and nodded.

“I’ll inform my staff; and if you’d like to send for any more of your things, notify the steward, and it will be arranged. Do enjoy the wine...and the books.” He drained his glass, then departed.

Grace grinned to herself when the study door shut. What luck! She’d been sneaking in there to read Abnur Tharn’s books for years. He’d known from the beginning, of course, but he only “caught” her once she’d wanted him to. It was a strange game of cat and mouse.

She began scanning the titles of his shelves, making mental notes of which to borrow. By this time tomorrow, the shelves would look like holey cheese, and it would irk Abnur to no end! Unfettered access to his personal library *and* use of the Imperial Archives could be dangerous in the best possible ways.

The thought of being allowed to wander the vaults unhindered gave her chills. Having Abnur's permission to freely do so meant not being bothered by people barring her way or asking her stupid questions. He was a useful friend to have...if he could be called that.

It was unlikely Abnur Tharn actually *had* any genuine friends. His posturing, self-importance, and generally dismissive attitude toward *everyone* was easy enough to ignore, at least for her. The mysteriously vacant caverns housing Dwemer ruins inspired far more awe in her than living people of power and influence. Abnur *was*, without question, brilliant. His vast knowledge and analytical skills would certainly prove useful, but Grace would never indulge his pride by allowing him to know that. The last thing *that* man needed was his ego inflated any more than it already was.

The inexplicable lust of her early adolescence for the old battlemage had waned with the discovery of bedding whoever she wanted. Another tidbit she would take to her grave. These days, anything to do with Abnur Tharn was mostly innocuous. The greatest pleasure she took from their interactions was in ruffling his feathers, something she would do with great gusto.

"This...is what you *want* to do?" Grace's grandfather's bushy brow was furrowed, drawing them together into what looked like a long, wooly caterpillar. They were standing beside the horses, which were ready to take him back home.

"Yes, I'm staying." Grace sighed, resisting the urge to roll her eyes but smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way. "Already, my fingers itch to get into the Archives; you have my list of things to send, yes?"

"Of course." He nodded and chewed the inside of his cheek, obviously biting back several remarks he wanted to make. In Abnur's absence from Nibenay, her grandfather kept things running smoothly. Like most, he felt little in the way of fondness toward his Overlord. No Tharn was easy to like. The name inspired feelings of Imperial stability, not warm fuzzies. "Your mother is going to..."

"Have her write me as many furious letters as will make her feel better." Grace patted his arm, but he leaned in close, lowering his voice so none might overhear.

"Your *father*..."

"My father supports my academic endeavors." She sighed. As far as the Empire, and the world for that matter, were concerned, her grandparents were her parents. The circumstances of her birth remained a closely guarded secret from the scrutiny of Nibenese society. Abnur had been present all those years ago when her mother brazenly announced her pregnancy and so he knew the truth.

"It isn't *academic* endeavors that concern me," Silero grumbled at last. Grace gave a quiet scoff of mock offense.

"Really, grandfather, what do you take me for?"

"Too damned smart for your own good. You're playing with fire, Gratiaren." He only used her full name when he was trying to emphasize how serious he was.

"Fortunately, I happen to be very *skilled* with fire." She grinned like the cat about to eat the canary, unable to stop herself.

“You’re impossible, do you know that?”

“Give mother and grandmother my love.” She kissed his cheek before turning on her heel and disappearing back into the manor.

Gilded Horror

24th of Hearthfire

Whatever the standards of anyone anywhere, the highest luxury that existed on the whole of Nirn was portal travel. Traveling on foot meant long grueling treks, blistered feet, sore muscles, sleeping rough, and contending with whatever weather there was. Not to mention wildlife peppered with apex predators.

Horseback riding that went on for more than a few miles meant saddle soreness, stiffness, and a strange bowlegged gait until one's legs loosened back up. Though also the same sleeping and weather conditions applied.

The next step up, which was barely better, was riding in a wagon. Lastly was traveling by carriage, which was tolerable depending on the carriage. Some were like riding inside of windowed torture boxes; others were almost comfortable.

But the ease of merely picking up belongings and taking two or three steps to arrive at a destination miles and miles away...nothing compared. Abnur was skilled with portals and rarely traveled by any other means. Grace's scant few attempts in school with portalcraft cost several rodents their lives.

Four footmen darted back and forth through the portal carrying numerous trunks. Some were Grace's; some were Abnur's. It was amusing because it made them both look as though they traveled with countless clothing items and whatever other material things people took with them to places. The truth of the matter is that between them both, there were maybe three trunks of apparel, and the remainder were filled with books, papers, files, artifacts, and journals.

Judging by the footmen's heavy breathing and the sweating, Grace thought perhaps she should have packed fewer items in more trunks to make them lighter. Still feeling a twinge of guilt, she watched as they carried them to her new rooms.

Abnur's palace apartments felt a bit like a hideous, gilded museum; it was as if a dragon with terrible taste had made all the decisions. *Why* was there so much gold on everything? The manor of his Nibenay estate was classic and refined, completely unlike this garish nightmare.

"It wasn't my choice." Abnur approached. He looked in a hurry.

"What?" Apparently, her thoughts were broadcasting themselves across her face again. "Oh, right. Yes, this is horrifying."

"I hate it." He agreed, glancing around as one of his personal footmen came jogging up to them breathless. The young man had many parchment scrolls under one arm, and three large books beneath the other. Abnur looked at her, though. "Change it."

"What?" Grace frowned, but he was striding toward the entrance.

"You heard me. I'll send someone." The door slammed hard as she stared dumbly after him. Change *what*? The apartment?

She hadn't seen hide nor hair of him the four days she spent at his estate, and her expectations were the same for the City. There was a quiet throat-clearing, and she turned to find a slim, middle-aged woman, with light brown hair waiting to be addressed. Her posture was a bit rigid, and she looked very proper.

"Oh, forgive me. Hello." Grace told her quickly.

"Not at all, milady." The woman gave a nod. "My name is Nalea; I am Chancellor Tharn's housekeeper." There was a hint of wariness in her eyes as she prepared herself for whatever type of person Grace might be. "If there is anything you require, you may ask me directly or any of the serv-...attendants." Grace frowned the tiniest bit at the odd correction.

"Yes, of course. I am Grace...well, I'm Gratiaren Tiradia. Though...I suppose you already know that." She squirmed internally a little. Formality was not her forte.

"I do, yes, milady." Nalea nodded.

"Do you know what Abnur—erm...the chancellor meant on his way out?"

"I assume he is going to send a palace decorator to meet with you so that you might decide the best way to update these quarters." Nalea's wariness had evolved into curiosity. Grace's mouth worked soundlessly as she tried to settle on *anything* to say. "It is long overdue. By about seven years." At that, Grace laughed aloud, liking the housekeeper immensely at once.

"Yes, I understand. Of *course*, this travesty was Pulasia's doing." She looked around again. Nalea made no reply, her face carefully schooled as she waited for some instruction. "Oh, but it is very nice to meet you, Nalea. I will try not to bother the staff too much, I don't need much..." Surprise flashed briefly on the older woman's face.

"It is no bother; it's what we're here for." Nalea's expression softened a good deal then, and she smiled. The pleasantness reaching her eyes. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last." *At last?* Grace brushed away the thought, though.

Her quarters were decidedly less gaudy than the main living space of the apartment. She still didn't quite like it, though. Somehow, Grace had developed expectations of what Abnur's home away from home would be like, and what she'd found there was not meeting them. Why she even cared, she had no answer for. She *didn't* care...did she? Why would she? She barely cared about her *own* home. Her work could be done reading by candlelight at a rough-hewn table hammered together from driftwood just as easily as at a polished, mahogany desk in a room lit with crystal chandeliers.

With the promise of unrestricted access to the Imperial libraries and archives, Grace wasn't even sure where to begin. For the first time ever, there were *too* many options to consider as she made her way to the academic wing of the palace. She entered the library, gazing up at towering shelves of books. The smell of leather and parchment filled her with excitement and anticipation. Complete freedom to all the information! The history! The legends! The secrets! Was there anything better than *that*?

"Lady Tiradia?" Someone startled her out of her reverie, and she looked ahead to find what had to be an archive apprentice. Judging by the nervous air about him and his youth, combined with the unadorned clothes, there was little other possibility.

"Ah, yes. Hello." She greeted. Did everyone know who she was? *Why?* Could she not exist in

blissful anonymity and be left to her own devices?

“We’ve been expecting you, milady. An office has been prepared and set aside for you. We’ve gathered together many materials pertaining to the Dwemer. Though there are some which cannot be removed from their vaults and you must go to the vault yourself to access them. We do apologize, I hope that...”

“What? No, that’s perfectly alright...an *office* for my use? Whatever for?” Grace was taken completely aback. “I would have been content to sit on the floor reading beside one of the shelves, truly. Who had you go through all this trouble?” Why was she even asking? She knew perfectly well *who*.

“Uh...” The young man stared at her, uncomfortable and uncertain how to respond. “Chancellor Tharn, milady, of course. He sent word two days ago to make preparations...did you not...know?” He blinked, bewildered.

“No...I did not expect him to go through so much trouble on my account. But it is appreciated... what is your name?” *Why*, in the name of all things sacred, would that pompous ass do this?

“I am called Hereic, milady. I have been assigned to personally assist you. If you object and request someone of higher rank, I will inform them immediately...”

“No! No, please...I don’t *require* an assistant at all, but I will accept your help gratefully if it is no trouble to you and doesn’t interrupt your own work.” Things were getting stranger and stranger. *What in the bloody fuck is going on?* She was reeling.

“Trouble? Not at all, milady, many of us have read your works, not to mention it is a promotion to assist the mis—” He halted abruptly, mortification on his face as it drained of all blood. “The chancellor’s guest.”

“What?” Grace frowned, her eyes narrowing at the boy.

“If there is anything you require, books, supplies, simply tell me and I am happy to fetch them. Though also, I have been studying Ayleidoon extensively, which could prove helpful for translating...” He babbled, desperate to depart from his near slip-up. She decided to let it go.

“Yes, of course, that’s an instrumental skill for my endeavors, Hereic.” As she nodded approvingly, he was flooded with relief. This stay in the City was going to be odd, to say the least. “Could you show me this office that you mentioned?”

“Yes! Follow me, please, Lady Tiradia.” Hereic scurried off, and Grace followed him through the maze of bookcases, down three corridors, a flight of stairs, two more spiral staircases until they’d reached well into the bowels of the archives.

Her assistant opened a heavy wooden door and led her into a fairly spacious, comfortable-looking office. There was a desk, shelves lining the walls, good lighting, and worktables. There were no frills, no extravagant furniture, or fabric...it was perfect.

“I like this.” Grace murmured, and Hereic grinned suddenly.

“I thought you might. Some argued that you should have nicer things, but the elders were with me. They said if you are truly the scholar you claim to be, then this will be all you need.”

“It is so much more, really. I thought my privileges were limited to access alone. I have piles of journals I was fully prepared to fill with transcriptions.” She stepped forward and ran her fingers

across the top of the broad desk. Everything in there was old and used, though well taken care of. It was full of history and countless hours of study and discussion.

“Well, milady, where would you like to start?”

“I have no idea.” She laughed. “I will need to have my things brought down, then I will organize, and *then* I will know where to begin.”

“Of course. Since you’ve only just arrived, when you’re ready, you need only send to have your things fetched, and we will...” Hereic was interrupted by some commotion outside the door and the sound of muffled arguing.

“You cannot simply...”

“*I have* my orders from the *Chancellor*! You will not bar me!” The door slammed open, and through it stepped a harried, well-dressed man who huffed and straightened his clothes. He swept into an almost theatrical bow. “I do humbly beg your pardon, my lady.” His dark hair was close-cropped, and he wore a goatee with a ridiculous mustache. The ends were waxed into points and curled up on either side.

“And you are?” Grace gave the intruder a level look. She had a guess already.

“My lady, I am Tievus Venodius. Long-time architect, and designer of interiors here at the White-Gold Tower.” His chest puffed up a little, and she let out her breath slowly. Her guess had been correct. “Well, certainly not *this* room, though.”

“I am...*so* sorry, Lady Tiradia...” A winded, heavysset apprentice with curly blond hair and similar in age to Hereic panted.

“Not to worry, ah...” She gestured to the puffing youth for his name.

“Lobo, milady.”

“Lobo?” She blinked. “Very well, Lobo. Not to worry, I will see to Mr. Venodius.” Lobo gave a grateful bow and left, closing the door behind him. Grace turned to the matter at hand. “Well, Mr. Venodius, the chancellor sent you, I know.”

“This...is the space to be redone? It certainly needs it.” He looked around, unimpressed.

“It’s not, actually. This office is exactly as I want it. Apparently, it’s been left to me to update Abnur’s apartment.” She folded her arms, watching as the designer seemed to light up.

“Oh! Thank the Divines! The poor bastard forced to design that assault upon the eyes almost threw himself into the river after.” He chuckled. “Oh, pardon my language, Lady Tiradia...”

“Think nothing of it. Speak freely with me, please. You’ll find my language is equally offensive.” She smirked and glanced at Hereic. “You, too. Relax, I don’t want anyone walking on eggshells. It’s ridiculous.” He nodded vigorously.

“You are...of a different temperament than I am accustomed to,” Tievus observed.

“Good. The day I start behaving like the snooty Imperial noblewomen, I hope someone holds my head underwater until the bubbles stop.”

Hereic laughed unexpectedly, then cleared his throat.

“Well, madam, I was summoned to assist with your redesign. When would you like to look at the space and begin planning?” Tievus seemed especially eager.

“Do you have time now?”

“I am at your disposal.”

“Alright.” Grace turned to Hereic. “I’ll get the things ready that I need to have brought down here and send word to move them.”

“Yes, milady.” He nodded.

“I will likely return tomorrow.” She looked to the designer once more. “Let us go then.”

“Do you have anything in mind, Lady Tiradia? Perhaps fine Altmer silks, dark wood from The Rift, marble from Summerset?” Tievus listed off as they made their way to Abnur’s apartment.

“I’ve never had anything decorated in my life. Usually, I just deal with whatever is already there.” Glancing over, she found the odd man staring at her, as though analyzing her appearance.

“Clearly. You know, there *are* other designers who could assist with...” He gestured vaguely at all of her. Grace gave him a pointed look, and he shook his head. “No matter. It will be with unbridled joy that we get rid of that monstrous gold. I have *seen* tastefully gilt residences. That is not one of them.” Suddenly he gave her a very sidelong look. “It is my understanding that Chancellor Tharn has instructed each of his wives to design the apartment as they saw fit.”

“Is that so?” She narrowed her eyes back at him. “Then that makes it that much *stranger* that’s he’s having me do it.” Grace was getting the feeling that assumptions were being made about her and Abnur. That wasn’t exactly a topic she had *any* desire to address. *Surely* ignoring it and hoping it would go away would work.

Inside the expansive apartment, Tievus walked around, making quiet comments to himself and periodically tutting and sighing heavily. He had a small book he scribbled notes in, flipping to different sections of it. Finally, snapping the little book shut, he returned to Grace’s side.

“It’s good that this is his cost and not yours. It is going to be very expensive.”

“I can’t imagine it’s going to be as expensive as dipping everything in gold.” She grimaced.

“True, for something so ugly, it was very pricey. But...that could be said of the woman herself as well.” Tievus waggled his brows, eliciting a grin from Grace that she tried to suppress. “Now, I presume, as always, that the library and the chancellor’s sleeping quarters are not to be touched?”

“I assume if they never were before, then they shouldn’t be now. That’s not a conversation I want to have with him.”

He let out a low whistle. “Nor do I.”

Grand Plans

25th of Hearthfire

It was easier to simply set Tievus free in the apartment with a few loose guidelines than for Grace to oversee every detail of the project. Interior design was nowhere in her skills or interests. There were many more important and more interesting things to occupy her. Such as filling her office with her belongings and launching a full-scale expedition project that would almost certainly be exceedingly dangerous. If she was going to reach, she would reach high.

She was in the midst of hanging a large map of Tamriel when Hereic arrived with a female apprentice in tow. He immediately darted forward to hold the giant, unwieldy sheet of parchment as Grace fastened it to the wall. She glanced over her shoulder at the girl who stood silently, watching with large, sky blue eyes.

“Who is this?”

“Ah, milady, this is Avise. She’s also been assigned here...they don’t have anyone else right now and...” Hereic looked uncomfortable. Grace never had help before in her endeavors, and while protective over her work, she did like the idea of unloading some of the more tedious tasks onto someone else.

“Oh, very well, then. Avise, there are several trunks by the worktables, if you would be so kind as to unpack them for me, please.”

“Yes, milady.” The girl bobbed a quick curtsy, her single sandy colored braid bouncing as she marched to the tables.

“I thought you might be upset,” Hereic whispered.

“Why? Is she dim?”

“N-no, of course not...”

“Then I welcome whatever help I get. Especially since I decided last night that while I’m here, we’re going to take a little trip. There is a Dwemer city called Rkundzelft in Craglorn; it’s quite far, but I might see if I can get Abnur to portal us close to it.”

“Craglorn?! And what do you mean, *we*?” He blanched.

“Me, you, and now Avise as well, since she’s been volunteered as my assistant. The two of you will get more experience in there than you would in five years in the stacks.” Grace grinned.

“Knowing something because you read it is a great deal less interesting than knowing something because you were *there*.”

“You’d really take us into a ruined city?” Avise’s eyes grew large, but not with fear.

“See, Hereic? The girl is excited. I’ve gone into plenty without dying, we’ll be fine.”

Grace began piecing together a map of what might lie within Rkundzelft. She’d made contact the

year before with several explorers who had previously ventured within. It was too vast for any of them to have explored it fully, and they didn't have what she did: a way to sooth the automatons. With that obstacle out of the way, there was much she could accomplish.

It was the still-operating constructs of the Dwemer that kept most of their ruins untouched, but Grace had designed and extensively tested a device that could be worn that would either cause the automatons to ignore the wearer or simply remain in a dormant state awaiting a threat. She'd gone through several iterations of the device before finding a way for it to work against many different kinds of constructs. Depending on how many people were going, she might need to make a couple more. She already had three functioning.

"According to the correspondences, many of them seem to stop here." Avise pointed to a spot on the makeshift map, which had been laid out on the floor. Certain parts were tacked down, which were the bits they could verify were not merely guesses.

"Yes, I suspect there is a sentinel there, a centurion perhaps. That usually stops explorers." Grace peered at the map. Indeed, the five individuals who had taken that corridor all did an abrupt about-face and drastically altered their routes.

"By killing them?" Hereic's voice cracked a little. He seemed quite nervous, and Grace suspected he had done little outside of libraries and archives in his entire life.

"Sometimes, probably." She mused. His already pale face turned almost gray.

"Calm down, you obnoxious goose. She's a *mage*. We'll be fine." Avise rolled her eyes.

"You are?" Hereic frowned.

"I guess you didn't read everything there is to read about me." Grace gave a snort, then looked at her other assistant. "And *you* did."

"I have a curious mind and wanted to know if they were throwing me at some useless scholar that would have me do nothing but transcribe books." The girl shrugged. It was fair, Grace would have done the same.

"Good job, and lucky you. I mean, I might get you killed, but...it won't be boring."

"Still better than transcribing."

"Speak for yourself," Hereic muttered.

There was a purpose, of course, for the expedition into Rkundzelft. The goal wasn't simple exploration; there was a library rumored to be within. Grace had found very old notes that an unnamed individual had left in a box at the back of a ruined archive she'd found. The Dwemer had unearthed secrets that were buried once more when the whole of the civilization mysteriously vanished. She hoped to catch a glimpse of something that no one living had ever seen.

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The clock in Tharn's office chimed ten, and he looked up from the policy documents he was reviewing. A frown knit his brow, not at the late hour, but at the fact that someone had fixed the chime. He preferred not to be interrupted even by an inanimate object. Somehow, its hourly sounding earlier had gone unnoticed, but he *was* an incredibly focused individual, of course.

There was one interruption he had been expecting, however, that never came. He'd instructed Nalea to send word when Grace returned to the apartment, but no such message had arrived. It was no surprise though, he'd set his guest loose in the archives with ample help and endless resources. It'd take a miracle to pry her out of there at all.

He'd have to fetch her himself, then.

Tharn organized the papers on his desk, returning scrolls to appropriate tubes and drawers before locking everything up. The chancellor's chambers were quiet this time of night; he was usually the last one to depart. Passing no one but the posted guards, he went to the archives. The stacks were dark, the archivists and scholars had all retired. Though it appeared empty, there was probably no part of the entire palace more closely guarded. Thousands of years of records and information was far more valuable even than their blasted emperor.

There was only one office with light shining from beneath the door, and when he opened it, Tharn smirked at what he found. Sections of the walls without bookshelves were covered in papers and sketches, a huge map with numerous markers hung across the front of two bookcases, and there was a strange, pieced-together map tacked to the floor. He'd expected nothing less.

At the desk, Grace was fast asleep with her head down, one arm out with her cheek pressed to the surface. Across the room, surrounded by a semi-circle of books in short stacks, was one assistant, tilted back in his chair, snoring away whilst leaned against a wall.

Feeling uncharitable, Tharn gave the chair a kick, sending its occupant crashing loudly to the floor. The boy shrieked, and the whole commotion roused Grace. She sat bolt upright, a sheet of parchment stuck to her face. Snatching it off, she blinked then frowned accusingly.

"What the fuck, Abnur." She stifled a yawn, though, and the assistant scrambled to his feet.

"L-Lord Tharn, I..."

"It's late. You're dismissed." He gave a wave, and the startled, groggy young man fled at once, door slamming behind him.

"Did you *have* to do that?" Grace got to her feet and stretched a little.

"No." Tharn started taking a closer look at the map on the floor. "I thought you had two assistants."

"I do. Avise is a bit sharper than Hereic and left an hour ago or so for the comfort of her own bed." She came up beside him. "Rkundzelt."

"I thought as much. Why the focus on that particular ruin, though?" He glanced at her as she studied her map. She was a bit disheveled, blinking sleepily.

"I'm planning a trip. I'll get these youngsters some *real* experience."

“You mean, you’ll get them killed.” He gave a laugh.

“They’ll be fine.”

“Didn’t you almost burn to death on your last little outing?” At that, he turned toward her, concerned. Not necessarily for her, but for the state of Nibenay if the Lord Governor’s *daughter* was killed while *his* guest. Not only that, her *actual* parents would be insufferable. Well, and he, too, would prefer she didn’t die.

“I was still testing my beacon prototype that time; I’ve been out since with no such issues. Besides, we’ll be *fine*. Especially if you come along.” She grinned up at him then, not particularly adept at feigning innocence. The look was more manic expectation than *innocent*.

“You only want me for my portals.”

“*What?*” She gasped in mock offense. “I want you for more than that.” She was a bloody menace, but she went on, not missing a beat. “How could you say such a thing? I hear you’re a fairly good mage. And it might be good to have a backup if my beacon fails, and I’m burnt to a crisp.” He set his jaw, seeking to choose his words carefully before abandoning them altogether, electing instead to ignore the intimation.

“*Fairly good?*” Tharn folded his arms, looking stern. Grace flashed a bright grin.

“Are you not? I’d hate to have to ask someone else. I’d have thought you’d be especially eager to possibly enter a Dwemer library no one alive has ever set foot in.” Her eyes went back to the map at their feet.

“Of course I’m going.”

“I’ve only got guesses as to where it might be, but I suspect it’s behind whatever frightened everyone away from this spot.” She pointed with her toe to a sheet of parchment with various names and dates of explorers who stopped there.

“If it’s heavily guarded, it very well could be.” He nodded, growing more interested in what might be in a Dwemer archive. “When can you be ready?” The look Grace gave Tharn made him almost regret asking the question.

“I’m always ready.” How it was even possible to pack that much mischief and trouble into a single glance, he would never know. His insurmountable collection of knowledge did not include understanding the intricacies of women’s minds.

“We leave in four days.” He turned away from her, peering instead at all the items laid out on the worktables. Mostly it was comprised of various disassembled Dwemer contraptions, but likely there was a fair bit of her own tinkering in amongst it all.

“That’s plenty of time to put together one more beacon.” At once, Grace marched over to a box, rummaging through it to the sounds of small metal parts clattering together.

“Perhaps rest before making the contraption that allegedly ensures safety from automatons, yes? Time to go see what havoc that designer has wreaked in my quarters.” Tharn sighed.

“I told him something tasteful and classic.” She looked up from the box and shrugged.

“*What?* No *direction*? No *theme*?”

“If you had something specific in mind, then *you* should have been in charge of it, Abnur. I don’t know the first thing about decorating.” Her brows shot upward suddenly. “Did you *assume* that just because I’m a wo-...”

“NO.” He cut her off. Firstly, that was not the case. And secondly, he’d gotten into that argument with her before, and did *not* wish to do so again. “I’m retiring for the night. Hopefully, Nalea saved some dinner.” That took the wind right out of Grace’s sails.

“Shit.” She dropped the various gears and screws back into the box. “Was I supposed to be back for dinner? Did they make a whole meal for *no one*?”

“Let’s just *go*.” He rolled his eyes.

Most of the furniture, which had borne excessive gold trim and fabric, was gone. The place looked almost desolate. The trim throughout, was partially stripped of its white paint, and ugly golden wall accents torn down. Tievus *had* said the whole project would take weeks. Grace didn’t know if she’d even *be* there weeks from now. Though, if she were, her mother would lose her mind.

Nalea appeared then, a white nightcap over her hair, a robe tied tightly, and she hurried toward them.

“Good evening, Chancellor, Lady Tiradia.”

“Two plates, nothing extravagant. Something to go with white wine. That’ll be all for the night.” Abnur ordered as he headed for his study. Grace followed, finally feeling the pangs of hunger, which were now complaining audibly.

“Why did you go through the trouble of getting me my own space in the archives?” She’d wanted to ask him the day before but never saw him. He started sorting through a pile of correspondence that had been left on his desk.

“Hm? What good would it have done to have access to everything and nowhere to study it?” He scoffed, then handed her an envelope. “That’s yours.” She took it and wrinkled her nose at once. The handwriting on the front was her mother’s.

“That didn’t take long.” Grace dropped into a chair and started peeling back the wax seal.

“What?”

“My mother.” She indicated the letter. “She is no doubt deeply displeased that I’m here.”

“That you’re here or that you’re here by *my* invitation?”

“What do you think?”

“She’s always hated me.” He sat down to delve into his own letters.

The note from Juri was indeed furious, as expected, and didn't even begin with any sort of greeting!

What are you thinking? How could you elect to stay with Tharn, Gratiaren? Your grandfather has his own establishment in the city, why would you not simply go there? It is but a short ride to the palace. Is Tharn insisting you remain with him in order to access the archives? What does he want with you? He must have some demand you have agreed to meet. I know you will do anything to further your research, but please, not this!

People will begin to talk. I just know it. They will say terrible things, and what reputation you have left will be shredded to pieces! Don't you care? No. Of course you do not! You care not for the thoughts of others, but please, daughter, think! Think about the kind of man he is. Ambitious! Ruthless! Those are not qualities I want you to develop and I...

Grace stopped reading and let out a long sigh. It was just as she would have expected from her mother. The angry rant went on for two more pages, and she simply didn't have the will to give it any of her energy.

"I'm not sure *she* should be lecturing me about reputation." She huffed.

"I'm glad you said it, now I don't have to."

"I should sleep with you just to spite her." She muttered mostly to herself, then folded the parchment back up and cramming it into its envelope. Abnur looked up from what he was reading and thought better of whatever he was going to say before putting his attention back on his own correspondence.

It was the tiniest bit disappointing that he hadn't taken any of her bait lately. Grace was fairly certain that she was already generally assumed to be his mistress. It brought to mind things she hadn't thought about in quite some time. She was curious, of course, what it might be like with him. However, her work was too important to her, having access to the archives was too important. It wasn't worth the risk.

"What?" Abnur's voice pulled her from her thoughts, and she realized she was staring right at him. "Right here? Right now? On the desk? Nalea is about to bring dinner, it would be deeply unsettling for her to walk in on, I'm sure." Apparently, he *had* heard her last mumbled comment. The snide tone said enough.

"You should be so lucky." She shot back. As though on cue, the housekeeper entered the study. She carried the tray containing their dinner and a bottle of white wine.

"Shall I open the bottle, chancellor?" She set the tray down on a side table, but Abnur had gone back to reading. He shook his head and waved her off, saying nothing.

"Goodnight, Nalea." Grace at least would be polite, though she imagined his staff was well accustomed to his dismissiveness.

"Goodnight, Lady Tiradia." Nalea smiled then left, pointedly shutting the door behind her. Apparently, she, too, was under the same impression as everyone else.

Exploration Preparation

27th of Hearthfire

“If I’m correct, which I probably am, there could be countless working automatons in the city. They’re designed to attack anything viewed as a threat, which is anything *not* Dwemer.” Grace stretched and rolled over, picking up the glass of wine from the bedside table. She took a sip before turning back over.

“When do you leave?” He was a tall, beautiful, golden Altmer who said his name was Andian, not that it mattered. She’d been with him before, he was quite good.

“The day after tomorrow. I spent yesterday and today prepping my assistants and building a device that will be helpful to have along.” She wasn’t going to go into detail about the beacon, she wasn’t there for deep conversation after all. This was the best brothel in Tamriel. At least, that was the best one she’d been to so far. The room was quite lovely, each worker had their own and kept it how they wanted.

“It all sounds...very dangerous.” Andian moved over her and kissed her neck. She felt his teeth graze her skin, sending delectable chills all through her.

“It is, but it’s *exciting*.” Grace grinned, hands sliding up his sides. He felt quite nice, although she was a little bit distracted. Her mind had been wandering the last two days, skirting the edges of realms she wanted to avoid. *This* was her solution. Physical gratification; that would nip it all right in the bud. It *had* been a while.

“More exciting than this?” Andian’s hand slid down her belly, fingers finding her, and the distraction of distant, unwanted thoughts vanished.

“Different exciting.” Her breath came faster as he did what he did. “And *your* brand of fire isn’t going to require medical attention.”

“That would cost extra.” Andian chuckled and kissed her on the mouth.

“I booked your whole night, I don’t think I could handle anything extra.”

“No, certainly not.” He shifted a little then was inside her, and she didn’t need to think anymore at all.

The sky was barely starting to turn pink when Grace stepped outside the establishment just before dawn. She’d slept a little, at least. The air was crisp, and the streets quiet, but she flinched when a palace guard came forward seemingly out of nowhere. The instantly ready flame in her palm fizzled out.

“Apologies, milady. I will escort you back.” He said, a little stiffly. She stared, annoyed.

“I could have walked back on my own just fine, have you been waiting out here all night?” It was rather cold this time of year, it didn’t seem very fair that he’d been made to freeze while she was warm and...

“Orders are orders, milady.”

“*Orders?*” Grace scoffed and shook her head. “Bloody Tharn.” Was there nothing he did not see? Was she being *watched* all the time? Probably! Nosy bastard.

She was grateful to encounter no one else between the brothel and the palace apartment. In the blissful silence of the early morning, she slid into a hot bath and soaked for a while. There would be little relaxing in the coming days, especially considering she intended to have a word with Abnur about his meddling...or whatever it was he was doing. Sending the guard as an escort was a message, not a courtesy. She was more than capable of seeing herself even through dark streets to and from the White-Gold Tower. It would take much more than a common criminal or two to get in her way. He *knew* that. He’d sent the guard to show that he knew what she was up to. To *what* end?

Still irritated, Grace dressed and braided her hair, looping it up and around itself to be fastened into a large bun at the crown of her head. Abnur was an early riser, and as expected, she found him in his study. He barely glanced up at her, and noting her anger shining through her glass face, he rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair.

“This should be good. Go on, slam the door.” He sighed. She did, then marched forward, standing in front of his desk with her arms crossed.

“For what possible reason would you send a guard out to wait for *me*?”

“To escort you back, was that somehow *not* clear?”

“With my considerable ability to *incinerate* organic matter, I would not have thought an escort necessary.” She hissed. “It was invasive and unwarranted. He was standing there all night...” Grace stopped, seeing what could have been a satisfied twinkle in Abnur’s eye.

“To be perfectly honest, I would have never guessed he’d be standing there all night.” He looked up at her, one brow arched, telling of his amusement. It agitated her further.

“I suppose that’s what you get for assuming the rest of us only take as long as you do.” It was a rude thing to say, but it didn’t *really* matter when talking to him, did it? He laughed though, somehow finding the insult funny. “What are you doing, Abnur? Do you have me watched every moment? Am I followed and observed for every single thing I do?”

“You’re my guest here in the White-Gold Tower. That makes you my responsibility.”

“Why?”

“*Must* I repeat myself?”

“*Why* am I your guest?” Grace watched his eyes, the piercing icy blue that seemed to see through everyone and everything. He certainly wasn’t a beautiful man, by any standard, with his almost hawkish face. Gray hair with a receding hairline also did him no favors. Yet, he was undeniably interesting, damn him. “You do nothing without reason, you never willingly seek the company of others. What is it you want?”

“Have you been listening to your *mother*?”

“And you’re a manipulative bastard, too.”

“Why are you so angry? I’ve done nothing to hinder you, I’ve been *generous*, have I not? You’ve got access to everything you want *and* need.” His eyes narrowed just a little. “Evidently.”

“I do not enjoy being played with.” She huffed. He arched a wry brow, eliciting a glare from her. “*Manipulated.*” She corrected, squirming internally under his stare. “Nothing is given freely, especially by a Tharn.”

“Can I not simply take pleasure in your company?” Abnur wore a self-satisfied smile. Grace’s eyes widened briefly, and she almost laughed, not believing him even for a second.

“Only if it benefits *you* somehow.”

He gave a snort. “Very well, your presence here does serve a purpose.”

“But, of course. Note how *absolutely* astounded I am.” If she could have rolled her eyes any harder, she would have.

“I am hounded regularly by ambitious individuals seeking to ascend the ladder of nobility. Both women, and greedy men with complicit, unmarried daughters.” His lips twisted into a sneer. “Certain assumptions have been intentionally perpetuated by what I imagine will be your extended presence here, as well as the remodeling of *that* disaster.” He nodded toward the door.

So, her suspicions were correct! For a long moment, Grace stared at him, mulling over the implications. Word would travel fast; her family would be furious. But even just the rumor strengthened the Tiradia foothold in Nibenay, not that it was in any danger at all whatsoever. This alleged involvement would link their families, even without marriage.

Abnur folded his hands, watching her, and looking smug. There was no way she could or would turn down such an offer, which he knew. She had no plans to marry, so it didn’t matter.

“So...simply allowing people to think that we...?” She started. Abnur nodded.

“Your presence here is all that’s required. As you mentioned, so boldly before, I prefer professional company. Just as you do.” He didn’t expect her to sleep with him, obviously. Somewhere, far away, deep down in a place that Grace refused to acknowledge, she was disappointed.

“Why me? Or were there others before me who refused?”

“There were not.” He sat forward, looking ready to get back to whatever work he was doing. She wasn’t sure how she felt about the arrangement. There would be no repercussions for him. Had this always been his plan?

“How long have you plotted this? Is this why you suggested I address you so familiarly? How stupid was I to think that perhaps we got along because of intellectual similarities and interests. Master manipulator, indeed.” Grace seethed, feeling foolish. She *hated* feeling like a fool. She’d believed herself cleverer than that, but he’d pulled one over on her anyway.

“Believe whatever you like, you’re unreasonable when you’re worked up over imagined slights.” He was getting bored with the discussion. “This arrangement is the price for your access to the archives and your office and your assistants.”

“What then of my reputation?”

“Don’t pretend you care about that.” Abnur sighed.

“So, I’m to be your *mistress* then, in name only. And reap all the benefits.” What she *should* have said then, was nothing. But she was incapable of not running her mouth. “Well, almost all of them.” Her eyes flitted briefly in the direction of his lap, then she turned, moving for the door. Abnur cleared his throat a little.

“Don’t forget to slam the door again on your way out.”

Grace was well into finishing the beacon assembly, and still stewing about her discussion with Abnur. It had been presumptuous and inconsiderate for him to take such steps without so much as mentioning it to her. But he was a Tharn, little else could be expected. Did he think she’d object? *Did* she object? No. Of course not. Letting nosy people whisper about her gave her resources she could only dream of having otherwise. And she was still free to do as she pleased. So it seemed. Only time would reveal what limitations would be put on her because of this supposed *association*.

Abnur had not explained himself, however, when it came to having her watched. What did it matter to him what she did in her own time? He also never said *why* he’d picked her. She could guess, though. Undoubtedly, it had to do with the fact she was *safe*. She wouldn’t want anything from him.

Well, her curiosity could think of one thing.

Gah!

She attached the final piece into the beacon and checked its resonance. It was on par with the others. Hopefully, they were as effective against bigger constructs as they were spheres and spiders. Each beacon was about the size of her palm. She’d designed them after taking apart a sphere she’d forcefully deactivated during one of her many expeditions. The resonance acted like a passkey; if something gave off and received a resonating signal at the appropriate frequency, the automatons would not perceive them as a threat. Or at least that was why they didn’t attack each other. How the Dwemer themselves were viewed as non-hostile, she had yet to figure out.

“How long do you think we will be there?” Avise was excited about the trip, at least. Hereic had been the same pallid shade for the last three days as he worried over the possible danger they’d walk into.

“As long as we can be without drawing attention to ourselves. With Abnur along, there is little to fear.” Grace assured her.

“I have never actually met the chancellor.”

“He’s an ass, just as you’ve heard.”

“Then how did you and him...” The girl stopped herself, and Grace looked up from the beacon to see her trying to make words but obviously failing. “I...sorry, I’ve gotten so used to just talking to you like you’re...”

“Like I’m not a *noble*?” She offered.

“Yes...it was inappropriate...I apologize...”

“Whatever nobles think of themselves, Avise, they’re no different from anyone else. They just believe they deserve undue respect because of their name or money.”

“Well, there *are* some who *are* due respect, of course...but most I’ve met seem only to think of themselves. And they want to hear how wonderful they are.” Avise rolled her eyes. “You’re not like that, so I forget what you are. Hereic came from a wealthy family, but I didn’t. It was a lot harder for me to get here than it was for him.”

“Does *he* mistreat you for that?” Grace almost got off her stool, ready to clobber the young man. “I did not think he’d be so witless...”

“No! Not at all. Luckily, here in the archives, they are about knowledge and merit more than wealth. It’s one of the rare places such things don’t matter as much.”

“That’s good. If anyone does and there’s nothing you can do, I will gladly stand with you.”

“Thank you.” Avise looked down at her knees.

“Now, ask me what you were going to ask me,” Grace smirked; she already knew what the question was, of course.

“Well, I was going to ask how someone like you got...involved with someone like Chancellor Tharn.” The girl shrugged, cheeks turning a little pink.

“He’s worked closely with my family all my life, so I’ve always known him, I suppose. I got older and grew into a woman, and I spent a lot of time doing research and pursuing knowledge...and yeah. It just kind of happened, I suppose.” It was the truth; that *was* how their strange *friendship*, if it could be called that, had developed. Though, presently, she wanted to strangle him.

“And you like...him? You like...*being* with him?” Avise seemed a little put off by the prospect, but it was Grace’s turn to blush, much to her own horror. She cleared her throat a little and aimlessly rearranged some of the components on the table.

“Ah, well, I...yes.” *Why* was she blushing? She never blushed! But *now* she was thinking about it. She didn’t *want* to think about it, she didn’t want to start thinking like she used to! Particularly because she was still angry with the smug bastard. Her face was getting hotter, though.

“He must like you too, very much.” The statement caught Grace off guard.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, he did all this for you.” Avise gestured to the office, which under other circumstances would be occupied by one of the most senior archivists. It *was* a good deal more than Abnur needed to do to lure her into their bargain. “I suppose maybe people are different behind closed doors, but that’s not my business. Anyway, I didn’t mean to embarrass you.” She picked up the beacon carefully, looking at it.

“No, I’m not embarrassed...” Grace fibbed. “I just don’t often come across the opportunity to discuss such things.” That was the truth, though. Though she had many acquaintances, academic and otherwise, there weren’t really any *close* friends. Even in her family, no one knew her deepest thoughts. The person who came closest to knowing her the best was...no. She grimaced, forcing herself not to finish the thought. “Let’s go over the gear for tomorrow. I want to make sure everyone is prepared.”

Rkundzelft

29th of Hearthfire

The sun wasn't up yet as Grace donned her snug leathers. They were the optimal attire for long treks into the unknown and the inevitable conflicts that would arise. She'd wear them all the time if she could have gotten away with it, preferring them to dresses. But, it was easier to wear what was *expected* than to listen to lectures from her mother and grandmother. Her attendant, Hester, brought the knee-high leather boots and jacket out from the dressing room. She insisted on helping Grace dress just about every day. It had become almost a challenge to see if it was possible to fully dress before Hester arrived. She was very determined to do her duty.

The boots were on, laced up, and buckles fastened. Grace stood to pick up the jacket and found Hester waiting patiently, holding it up helpfully.

"Very well." She grumbled, and Hester came forward, looking relieved, if not a little pleased as well.

"Milady, may I speak frankly?"

"Always, I insist." Grace glanced over one shoulder and then down at the diminutive woman. She was probably nearly the same age, but barely reached five feet. At three inches shy of six feet, Grace felt like a giant.

"Why are you so resistant to being waited upon?" Hester did her level best to help Grace into the jacket. On its own, it was heavy, but once donned, it was comfortable. It seemed a feat that Hester had even hoisted it up as she had.

"I don't have a lady's maid at home; I never have, and I prefer not to. It frustrates my mother to no end." Grace rolled her shoulders a little, tugging the jacket forward into place before starting to do up the hooks and buttons. "If it will make your life easier, I will allow you to help me more."

"That would be much appreciated, milady. May I do your hair as well?" Hester asked. "You're not very good at it." Grace laughed outright.

"That's true, I'm not. I suppose yes. Though, for this occasion, I need utility, nothing fancy. I'm going to be climbing through old ruins, I can't afford to have my hair getting in the way."

"Yes, milady."

Hester had done an excellent job taming the long, unruly waves, far better than Grace ever had on her own. Down in her office, none of her companions had arrived yet, and she rechecked her maps. She'd made smaller copies with plenty of room to expand if they got farther than what had already been discovered. Her mind raced through the potential scenarios, good and bad. Anything seemed possible, and it was best to prepare for the worst.

Hereic and Avise arrived, both clad in the exploration-wear Grace had procured for them. The former looked uncomfortable while the latter was eager to depart. She wanted them to be safe, and though she hadn't mentioned it aloud, bringing them along added more for her to worry about.

Though, at this point, given the state of things, she wasn't sure being alone with Abnur was a good idea. She couldn't trust herself, and while the infatuation of her youth had long waned, it had never died entirely. Like glowing coals, particular interests had been poked and fanned back into life. How? Why? She blamed all this time they were spending together. It was much more than ever previously.

"Do we have enough food and water? What other supplies should we have? What am I forgetting?" Hereic fretted, digging through his satchel.

"Did you forget who else is going? We *don't* have to worry." Avise sighed.

"Yes, they can conjure up whatever might be needed, but what if something happens to them?" He went on.

"My guess is that if something kills *them*, it will have killed us well beforehand." The girl mused. He looked up from the bag, mouth open.

"Don't rile him up, Avise." Grace attempted to keep a straight face.

"I have been *riled up* for the last *four days!*" He started dumping the contents of the bag to double-check everything was there yet again.

"Where is the chancellor? Is he late?" Avise glanced at the door.

"He'll arrive when he arrives." Grace organized her own bag quickly and grabbed several more pencils just in case. She'd never been on an expedition where she hadn't lost nearly every single writing implement she'd brought.

The door opened, and Abnur stepped in, looking extra full-of-himself. This was going to be a nightmare. Grace was regretting his presence already. He would take over the whole trip and make it his own, and she would...

She gave the skin on her wrist a sharp pinch and cleared away the cloudy, messy thoughts she was prone to when thus distracted. He looked good, too. *Stop it.* Her voice of reason begged to be in control once more.

Abnur's staff was slung across his back, and he was wearing his own leather armor. It was black with bits of red and of course the Imperial diamond here and there. He glanced at Grace, but then looked again. It occurred to her that he'd never seen her like this, dressed and poised for adventure. Inwardly she smiled, then her better sense took hold once more, abruptly berating the wayward thoughts. She was trying to remain angry with him. He *deserved* her ire.

"Is the boy worried about being collateral damage?" Abnur came toward her, then spoke a little more quietly. "We can't afford to have any liabilities along for this journey, Grace." The sound of her name from his lips sent a small chill down her spine. He didn't say it very often. But, her impulses were well in hand, and she gave no outward sign of the chaos he wreaked within.

"*Don't* make it worse." She muttered at him, but then turned to her assistant. "Hereic!"

"Yes, milady?" He stood up straight.

"Get your bloody shit together." She ordered. Quickly he began shoving his items back into the bag. "Not just that, your mental shit. Get it together." She took him by the shoulders, and he looked her in the eye; his were round and full of anxiousness. "You care about knowledge, don't you? You've studied Calcelmo's stone."

“Yes, milady.”

“We’re going to see something that very few, if any, have ever seen. Even many of the established archivists have never ventured beyond the stacks. I need you to have your wits about you. Do you want to look upon history and all the mysterious things about it with your *own* eyes?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then, get...your shit...*together*.” She gave his shoulders a squeeze, then pointed back over her shoulder with her thumb. “*That* is Abnur Tharn. Are you questioning *his* ability to protect us?”

“N-no! Never. I wouldn’t...”

“I have taken every precaution to ensure our safety, Hereic. Don’t allow your fear of the unknown to deny you glory.” Grace went back to the table where her bag and the beacons sat, moving the bag to a chair. Abnur was leaning casually against the edge, arms folded.

“How very touching. A rousing speech, to be sure.” He mocked. “And I never knew how highly you thought of me, I will be sure to...” She poked him in the chest.

“Shut up. And move; you’re in the way.” She cast him a sidelong glare.

“Yes, yes, as you command.” He mumbled, sarcasm laced through every syllable.

The beacons were laid out on the worktable, and she checked each one before finally picking one up. She’d added chains to them the night before as an extra measure of security. Avise was first, and Grace put it over her head then with a pin, fastened it to the front of her jacket.

“Do I get a speech, too?” She asked, grinning.

“Yes.” Grace narrowed her eyes. “Don’t do anything stupid or take any risks.”

“You know, I’m not sure these maps you’ve made are going to truly be of any use.” Abnur interrupted and pulled one from her bag. He examined it as she took the next beacon to Hereic.

“They’ll be plenty useful as the routes we take are marked down.”

“I’ll be able to do it from memory.” He scoffed.

“Of course you will.” She muttered quietly. Hereic had calmed himself considerably as she put the beacon on him. To make him feel better, she used two pins. Now it was extra secure.

Lastly, she turned to Abnur, having expected him to take his and put it on himself, but he hadn’t. He took a glove off and rubbed the map parchment between his thumb and forefinger, then nodded in approval.

“I see what you did there. Clever.” It was as high praise as she’d ever get from him. The maps were enchanted to keep track of their movements.

“Couldn’t be bothered to put your own on?”

“I don’t know what *fiddling* needs to be done with it.” He shrugged, turning to face her. Grace let out a long breath and took the map from him, putting it back. “Wouldn’t want to break it. Are you sure they’re in working order?”

“It would serve you right if yours malfunctioned.” She lifted the beacon by its chain, reaching

farther up as he was some inches taller than her. They were much closer than she would have liked with barely any space between them. He wasn't helping, he was intentionally making things worse, she *knew* it. He could have bent or done *anything* at all, but no. Grace was finding that her visit to the city's prime *establishment* had not served its purpose. But as she lifted his hair out of the way of the chain, her fingers grazed the back of Abnur's neck, and she saw him swallow. *Not made of stone, after all.* Against her better judgment, she met his gaze, watching him for longer than was necessary as she adjusted the chain. She looked down, though, to fasten the beacon to his jerkin. "There."

"*Safe* from automatons, supposedly." As Abnur looked down at it, Grace jerked her hands away from where they'd inadvertently come to rest on his chest, as though he'd suddenly burst into flame. Silently, she berated herself. She snapped her own beacon into the holster she'd made for her jacket, its chain in place.

"I think we're all set." She mentally checked off her to-do list.

Without a word, Abnur took his staff and rapped the butt of it against the floor with a simple gesture with his other hand. A light flashed, and the portal opened. Grace stepped through without hesitation.

"Go on, then. I'm not waiting all day." Abnur barked at the assistants who then quickly followed. He came through last, and the portal shut with a hiss and a pop.

Craglorn was not beautiful, at least not to Grace. It was a jagged, arid region. The barely risen sun cast long shadows from the hills and rocks, and she could see her breath. It was always colder at night. In a few hours, it would be blistering hot.

"This way." Abnur started off at once, and Grace jogged up beside him, matching pace as the others hustled to keep up.

"What have you heard of this city? Anything?" She was focused now, the task at hand firmly in the forefront of her mind.

"Specifically? Only what *you've* told me. The Dwemer overall, well, we've discussed that on several occasions." He squinted into the distance as if looking for a landmark. "If this contraption does what you say it does, I have some theories I'd like to test out at other locations at a later date."

"I've tested them, Abnur, on *live* automatons."

"Yes, well, seeing is believing. We need to go farther east and quickly. It is preferable not to be spotted by any locals."

The entrance was shielded and disguised by the rocks of a cliff face. The great door loomed over them, and it took some effort and a little bit of magic to pry it open just enough for them to slip in. Judging by the numerous scrapes and gouges in the metal, others had struggled even more with it. How had it always ended up closed again, though? Perhaps there was more to the machines that lie within than simple defense. Their instructions, no doubt, were more intricate than merely attacking anything deemed hostile. She wanted to know how such instructions were delivered and received and understood.

The inky black void before them shaped into a long, ominous corridor when Abnur used his staff to illuminate the passage. It smelled stale, and the scent of oil wafted toward them as the open door

drew the air out. Grace caught a hint of something else, though, an unsettling coppery odor. Abnur detected it as well because he touched her arm and gestured to the floor when the others weren't looking. Indeed there were old, dark brown stains where once upon a time, blood had pooled. Worse still, was that it looked as if whatever had been bleeding was dragged further into the ruin.

"To this day, no one has mastered metalcraft like the Dwemer had." Abnur gazed at the walls with as much fascination as the rest of them.

"I've never seen the alloy perfectly replicated. There have been claims, which I'd gone to see, of course. They were never even close." Grace's heart was hammering, and it seemed to skip a beat as there was a distant skittering sound of metal on metal up ahead.

"What was that?" Hereic hissed. "There's something! I heard something."

Farther in, somewhere, there was a low, mechanical sort of hum, but it was very brief. Things were starting up, metal creaked, and there was more skittering.

"They know we're here." Grace breathed.

Going Deeper

29th of Hearthfire Cont.

The group had made it farther into Rkundzelft without interference than Grace had expected. Finding the Dwemer library or data repository was all that mattered, and each time they passed another corridor or room without exploring it, she groaned internally. It had been more than an hour since they'd arrived, and there was little of note on the path they took. Plenty of others had made it this far; anything interesting would have been snatched up already.

A high-pitched scream echoed around them when the first Dwemer spider appeared, and Grace wasn't sure if it was Avise or Hereic. The light from Abnur's staff glinted against its metal body, the shadows cast by its long legs made it appear that much more ominous as it approached. It had popped up abruptly from a hatch in the floor, feet clanking against the metal floor.

"Sorry," Hereic whispered, revealing himself as the one who shrieked. All of them were still for a moment, but Grace shook her head and strode forward. She heard Abnur mutter something rude under his breath, and her assistants didn't seem to be breathing at all as they stared ahead.

The spider paused, then turned toward her. She could hear the whirring of its gears and resisted the impulse to touch the thing. She was confident in her beacon, but not so foolish as to take such an unnecessary risk. Every spider component she possessed had come from damaged units. If the deactivation mechanism could be found, she could possibly get one intact.

The machine-creature went about its business. Though, the question of just *what* its business was, burned inside her.

"You see?" Grace called, looking back at the other three. "And you all doubted me."

"When's the last time *you* took anyone's word for something without any empirical evidence, hm?" Abnur looked down at her when he reached her side.

"Mm. Fair point, I suppose."

Just as they reached an intersecting hallway of similar size, a sphere went whizzing by, startling even Grace, who stared after it. They were powered by steam and magic, that much was clear, but the one time she'd lured one outside its ruins, it deactivated and the core that had seemed to be powering it, ceased functioning and would not charge up again even back inside. Perhaps now, with better resources at her disposal, she would have the means to rebuild and reprogram one.

"It shouldn't be much farther to the point where everyone else turned back. It had better be something more than an impassible bridge or corridor." Abnur actually opened one of the maps, noting the progress it had tracked.

"You *want* something to fight?" Hereic spluttered indignantly.

"It would probably be easier than having to go *all* the way around." Avise sighed at him.

"Easier for *who*?"

Hereic and Avise had been unexpectedly and uncharacteristically silent for the duration of the trek through darkness to that point. Grace suspected that they were as intimidated by Abnur as they were by the ruins. She wasn't going to complain, though; quiet meant focused, which meant less potential for either of them to cause trouble. This didn't need to become a rescue mission as well.

There was no collapsed tunnel or bridge, nothing barring their way as they passed the point that no one seemed to have gone beyond. It was uncharted territory, and somehow, having nothing mapped, made Grace's heart hammer even harder in her chest. There were engraved plates along the walls, particularly at intersecting corridors and rooms. Hereic had been scribbling them down every time they passed one, which she would profusely thank him for later. Even if all they left with was some small device or an intact dynamo core, she would consider the excursion successful.

They arrived in what appeared to be a central rotunda. Several corridors all met there, and on the far side were towering metal doors leading to somewhere that obviously must have been important. One door was partially open, and Grace excitedly grabbed Abnur's arm, tugging eagerly at his sleeve.

"There's something good in there, there has to be. *Look* at those doors! The Dwemer revered knowledge and information the way most civilizations venerate their deities. Doors like that...it *has* to be something we would want."

"Don't get too excited. There could be centurions in there, or worse, absolutely nothing." He held the staff higher; the brightness intensified, lighting more of the cavernous space.

To Grace's brief annoyance, Abnur insisted on going through the doors first, but her irritation was overridden by what met her eyes on the other side. The Dwemer had vanished over twenty-seven hundred years earlier, so the facility was indeed a ruin, but this had clearly been a center for learning or for research. There were tarnished, unfinished automatons on tables, as well as damaged ones. Shelves that had fallen and spilled their contents lay on the floor amidst disintegrating books and parchment.

"We need more light." She complained, mostly to herself, but Abnur obliged. Several glowing orbs appeared overhead. At once, Grace began to rummage through debris, and from Hereic came the first happy sound he'd made all week.

"The parchment turns to dust if you touch it..." Avise observed.

"Keep looking. Anything important will have been magically preserved, not unlike the automatons." Grace called over her shoulder, then smirked. "If it's something *really* good, it might even give you a good zap when you touch it."

"*What?*" Hereic dropped whatever he was holding, staring down at it with concern.

Tharn had an unsettled feeling in his gut. A sensation which was rarely incorrect, and though he would have liked nothing better than to search with them through the decrepit contents of whatever this place was, he could only watch and listen. Grace's beacons had impressed him, yes, and the work she'd done with them was invaluable. It opened many doors for new research. But it was highly improbable that the devices would protect them from *all* manner of defenses.

She was intelligent and careful. Also trustworthy, for the most part, to not be careless on such an outing. But she was excited and quickly became hyper-focused on what was in front of her rather than what was happening around her.

Suddenly a hiss of steam echoed through the chamber, followed by a loud metallic crash. Grace and both her assistants looked up at once.

"Perfect." Tharn glowered, preparing.

"That sounds a lot larger than a sphere!" Hereic got to his feet, looking wildly around.

"That's because it is." A reddish-orange light flashed behind shelves and pillars at the far side of the expansive room. It sounded as if multiple units were activating.

"I think the beacons merely stalled them." Grace got to her feet, her palms glowing as she readied herself for the fight. "They would have come sooner otherwise."

Chaos erupted as a fallen shelf was hurled sideways, the centurion behind it came forward as two others climbed over debris. The towering machines each had an axe and a hammer for arms; both were equally as deadly. Immediately, Tharn placed a shield over the assistants; they were young, untrained, and utterly useless in this situation. Well, and most others.

Red hot swords materialized in Grace's hands, liquid fire dripping from the blades. She'd always preferred mage-weapons to staves. With a blast of blue arcane power, Tharn knocked one of the centurions back off the pile of debris it had just ascended. The other, which had reached the floor, stomped toward him.

Grace rushed across the room as the third barreled toward the shielded assistants, raising its hammer high in the air. She dove to her knees and with a burst of flame, stopped its swing with her crossed blades. Tharn bound the centurion in front of him, but spheres had begun to roll in. He took a couple out, reducing them to scrap. The fallen centurion had successfully climbed over the debris and made its way toward the shield. They seemed to sense the sustained magic and sought to destroy it first.

Inside the shield, Hereic and Avise stood close together, watching the fight around them, horror and helplessness in their eyes. Grace didn't look the slightest bit surprised, she knew what this was before even crossing the threshold. Three spheres had unfolded and were attacking the barrier when she pushed the centurion back with a large ball of fire. As she turned, Tharn saw her face, her eyes flashed red as she reduced one of the spheres to a puddle of molten metal. Her eyes when she fought, it was one of the few things that gave away her Dunmer heritage.

Spiders began to swarm then, and with an irritated expletive, Tharn slammed down his staff, sending out a booming shockwave in all directions. The skittering automatons twitched as lightning burned their circuits. Grace encased herself in a shell of fire for the mere seconds the wave lasted before she resumed her assault on the spheres. The shield flickered, and Tharn stabilized it.

"Behind you!" He shouted over the din, but as she destroyed the sphere, she turned in time to meet the sweep of a centurion hammer. Hurling sideways, Grace struck a collapsed shelf, crumpling to

the floor, but not unconscious. The sword in her left hand dissolved out of existence, pain etched on her face. Her arm must have broken.

A scream of rage tore from her as with her intact arm, she reached toward the centurion and unleashed a fiery blast. It felt uncomfortably hot even to Tharn across the room. The internals of the automaton were reduced to a glowing liquid state, and it collapsed, little remaining other than the head and arms.

A damaged spider crawled out from under the rubble beside her, and Tharn saw the flickering inside it too late. It self-destructed right beside her, throwing her against the shelves again, and this time rendering her unconscious.

Enough was enough.

Shielding her motionless form, Tharn released a storm of lightning into the room that reached every corner and crevice and ceased the activity of every remaining automaton. With their enemies dead, he dropped the shield and warded the room, rushing to where Grace lay.

“Oh no, oh no...” Avise dropped to her side. The injuries were severe, but Grace wasn’t dead. Her left arm was bent at an impossible angle, her nose was bleeding, and there was a gash down one side of her face. But the worst was a deep laceration across her abdomen, bleeding freely.

“Move back!” Tharn barked.

“No, she’ll die.” The girl put her hands over the wound, white light glowing from beneath them as she did so. Through the bloodied, torn leather, he saw her flesh knit back together. It wasn’t perfect, but it undoubtedly would save her.

“You’re a healer?” It was unexpected; there had been nothing in Avise’s background about such skills when he’d had the assistants vetted. She came from a poor family that had given nearly everything for her to study at the tower archives.

“I wanted to be.” She gently took hold of the broken arm, more white light emanating from her hands. Slowly the arm straightened out, then her hands moved over the rest of Grace’s limbs, halting at her ribcage. “Cracked ribs, a fracture in her left leg, but she’s not bleeding much anymore. She needs the *real* healers, though.” Avise touched the cut on Grace’s face, the light from her fingertips stemming the flow of blood.

“You’re right. Boy, get over here.” The young man scrambled to Tharn’s side as he rose, opening a portal. “Go through, run to the infirmary; tell them to get ready *now*.” Hereic nodded and darted through the portal. Tharn slung his staff across his back then bent again, taking Grace into his arms. “Follow me through, the wards will collapse when I go.”

The bed was soft and comfortable. Alright, so, the fight in Rkundzelft *didn’t* go well, apparently. With her eyes still closed, Grace tried to take stock of what possible injuries she might be

recovering from. After catching the broad side of an arm-hammer, she didn't remember anything else. But, the assistants!!

Her eyes flew open, and she sat up with a small wince. There was soreness, but not outright pain. She was in her bedroom at Abnur's apartment. By the windows, Avise and Hester were sitting in the armchairs, books in their laps as they talked. It was safe to assume, then, that she was the only injured member of the party.

"How long was I out?" She asked, startling both women. Hester leapt up, the book on her lap sliding to the floor as she inadvertently knocked over another pile, quickly getting flustered.

"Milady! Can I get you anything?" She hurried to the bed.

"Water, please." Grace's mouth was dry. Avise righted the stack of books before approaching.

"We brought you back yesterday." She helpfully explained.

"Was I hurt *that* badly?" Grace looked down at herself, she seemed to be in one piece. Her arm and midsection were a little sore, but that was it.

"You could have died. The chancellor made you sleep longer, he said it would speed up the healing since you'd talk too much and try to get out of bed otherwise."

"Ah, well, he's not wrong." She yawned, and Hester returned with a pitcher and a glass of water. "Thank you." Grace drained the glass in one go then handed it back.

"The physician is back, he wants to check on you, milady," Hester added.

"Alright, let him in." She sighed and laid back on the pillows. With everyone accounted for and whole, she could be disappointed in peace. "I can't believe we couldn't get *anything* from the ruins."

"I wouldn't say that." Avise grinned, then. "Chancellor Tharn went back, and he guilted Hereic into going with him."

"You mean, bullied?" Grace gave a snort.

"That's probably more accurate. I got the impression that there *were* some findings. So it wasn't a fruitless effort."

Abnur emerged from the sitting room, one of the physicians from the infirmary on his heels. Grace sat up, and for some reason, held the blankets closer to her chest. Heat crept into her cheeks as he smirked at her.

"Enjoy your nap?"

"I do feel rather rested." She shrugged.

"Is there any pain?" The physician butted in, giving Abnur a dirty look.

"Just some aches. What exactly happened?"

"Well," The physician took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "Your left arm was broken in three places, four cracked ribs, lower left leg fractured, countless contusions, facial laceration, and you were nearly disemboweled." Her eyes grew wider.

“What?”

“You have this one to thank for your life.” Abnur inclined his head toward Avise where she stood on the opposite side of the bed. Grace’s head whipped around to look at her assistant.

“*What?*”

“I don’t think that’s true, I mean...I stopped the bleeding and mostly stabilized your arm...” The girl’s face was suddenly crimson, and Grace’s brows arched high.

“Hidden talent, Avise?”

“This young lady is downplaying her role in your recovery, milady.” The physician shook his head but smiled. “Had she not taken the actions she did, I am not certain you would have mended as well as you have. There should be no lingering issues or scars. Perhaps a faint one on the lower abdomen, but aside from that, you should be able to return to your...regular activities right away.”

“Then, thanks are in order.” Grace beamed at Avise, who shook her head.

“Not at all, I could never do what you did, fighting those machines. So, I think we’re square.” Avise looked down, smiling bashfully.

“Good, that’s out of the way. I’d like a moment alone with the invalid.” Abnur, he was ever adept as obliterating moments of meaning. But, the room cleared out at once, and they were indeed alone.

“Think of the scandal, Abnur. No chaperone in a lady’s bedroom?”

“What scandal? They already assume I’m in your...*bedroom* every night.” He looked deeply amused by the color her face suddenly turned. She’d almost forgotten.

“Well.” She cleared her throat, determined to take back the upper hand. A difficult task, to be sure, once Abnur had it. “The doctor did say I’m cleared to return to my regular activities.”

“Heading directly out to the brothel, then? Or will you at least wait until nightfall, like a decent customer?”

“Considering that I should be resting after so grueling a fight, I imagine I will stay in and take care of things myself instead.” He hadn’t quite expected *that* response, and the very brief surprise on his face was incredibly satisfying.

“Good, I won’t need to have a guard follow you for that.” He stood a little straighter. “Anyway, it’s good your assistant turned out to be of some use, after all. I wasn’t expecting her to have any skill with healing. I’d hate to have to find someone *else* to pretend to share my bed.” Abnur arched a brow at her as her mouth fell open. “Rest up.” He turned on his heel and left her alone. Bloody bastard.

Aftermath

30th of Hearthfire

Having slept for more than a day straight, it didn't make sense to sleep some more. It was late, nearly midnight, and Grace stared at the ceiling above her bed. Her arm had begun to ache more than it was earlier. Even with top-notch healers, the process of healing bones was not painless. It hurt badly enough that after donning a simple dress and some shoes, she put it in the sling that had been left for her.

The posted guards looked a little surprised to see her as she headed toward the archives, but no one said anything. The silence was almost eerie, and the only sound was the soft padding of her leather soles against the marble floors. Avise had said Abnur returned to the ruin after bringing her to the infirmary, and Grace hoped that he'd at least left something for her to tinker with.

As she lit the lamps in her office, she saw several boxes on her worktables and a large crate on the floor. Her heart leapt as her mind immediately started racing. She went first to the crate. The lumpy thing inside it was covered in cloth, which she promptly yanked off.

Nestled inside was an *intact* sphere. There were scratches and small dents on it, but it was in no way destroyed. Grace gaped, running her hands over the cold, metal surface, feeling the engraved designs beneath her fingertips. She noticed then, the folded piece of parchment wedged between the side of the sphere and the crate. Maneuvering with some difficulty, she managed to free it using one foot, the knee of the opposite leg, and her hand. She recognized the tight script.

It's whole, but the core is dead. You will find in another box an intact, working dynamo core. I took it from one that met its demise via blunt trauma rather than lightning. Do not insert it without me present. –A

A grin spread across her face as she immediately got up and pulled the lid off one of the boxes. The first one contained a number of engraved metal plates and other objects with Dwemeris inscriptions. The next was an entirely disassembled spider. Picking a smaller one, she saw at once a red glow when she lifted the lid, and there was the sphere-sized dynamo core. They came in various sizes, of course, depending on the automaton itself. There was another note with it.

I mean it, Grace. Do not put it into the sphere. –A

Grace chuckled to herself. Lucky for him, she had only the one pain-free arm, presently, and therefore lacked the strength required both to open the sphere and to replace the core itself. It would be a project for another day. On the last table, there were three books. There was an arcane shine to them that suggested they were magically preserved, just as she had thought they might be. Touching the covers, her hands tingled, but there was no shock. Not every prediction could be correct. It didn't feel the same as most other magical artifacts, though. With every discovery, it

seemed there were twenty new questions for every one that was answered. Though, even the answers tended to be questions where the Dwemer were concerned.

The cover of the book was metal, intricately engraved with various precious stones imbedded in what looked to be a meaningful pattern. She lifted it, slowly opening the book, and touched the top page. It wasn't typical parchment, it felt sturdier. The text had an opalescent shimmer to it in the light. She leaned in close, inhaling the scent. Mostly it smelled like musty ruins, but the book hadn't been affected by time.

"Anything good?" The voice was right beside her. Grace shrieked and lurched away to find a very amused Abnur standing calmly, his hands folded behind his back. A small chuckle escaped him. "A bit jumpy, aren't you?"

"It's the middle of the bloody night!" She growled, her heart beginning to slow again. Tossing him a glare, she went back to the book, gently turning the page. She felt the thickness and texture between her fingers, and she examined the binding. "I've never seen a book like this before. I've seen half-destroyed Dwemer texts that others have found, but this...is pristine." She looked up when Abnur said nothing and frowned a little. "Were there not more automatons attacking when you went back?"

"The wards held up, there was enough time to grab a few things of interest."

"That was fortunate." Grace turned another page, eyes moving over the text. She recognized many of the symbols, but it would take a very long time to translate even a few words, if she even could. "I *didn't* insert it, by the way."

"What?" Abnur gave her a stony stare, but the tops of his ears were suddenly red.

"The functioning dynamo core." She managed not to laugh.

"Right. Of course." Despite the annoyance in his voice, he moved quite close to her side and stroked the page, feeling the texture, just as she had. His fingers were long, and his hands were broad. The veins and tendons stood out on the back and...*damn it!* Somehow, Abnur fucking Tharn had distracted Grace from the one thing that mattered to her more than anything else. Her own hand still lay on the opposite page, much smaller. The urge to touch those long fingers of his surged up inside her.

"I thought you'd have inspected all these already." She needed to stay focused, but her breath came a little faster. "I certainly didn't expect you to bring things to *me*."

"It was *your* little adventure, was it not?"

"Yes, but I got myself hurt and wasn't..."

"Do you want your artifacts or not?" He looked more amused than angry when she glanced at his face.

"What do *you* think?" With eyes back on the book, Grace turned the page, shooing Abnur's hand. Out of sight, out of mind, right? "The details in these diagrams are exquisite." She leaned down close to the page again, wishing she had her magnifying glass. Her unbound hair fell forward, and without warning, he casually brushed it back over her shoulder. She froze.

What in Oblivion was happening? *Say something...anything. Say words with your mouth, you daft goose!* No words came, but Grace stood up straight again, scrambling for any shred of concentration. She was a logical person, operating on reason and calculation. So she liked to think.

But her reason was becoming increasingly impaired where Abnur was concerned, and the heat suddenly thrumming through her urged her toward other actions.

“I don’t know where to begin to tell you how much I appreciate that you’ve brought all this back, of course.” Apparently, incapable of taking any action, she babbled instead. “It would have been simple enough to just go back once I was well again, but then I suppose the wards wouldn’t be up, and more automatons would be in place again...” But now she couldn’t stop. “That would have risked more injury, and I’d never forgive myself if someone else got hurt on my account...” She met his eyes, and he was *watching* her. Watching her carefully crafted confidence and sass fall apart. Inwardly, she glowered. It was that much worse because he wasn’t saying anything. Silence from Abnur Tharn was more uncomfortable than his criticism and insults.

“Did you hit your *head* today?” Thank the divines! She liked him better mean than silent. But he had noticed her increasingly flustered behavior. “You’re rambling like a concussed toddler.”

“I must have, because what besides fucking brain damage could make me...” Grace muttered, meeting the ice-blue gaze. *Don’t do it, don’t you...* she looked at his mouth. It wasn’t on purpose, her eyes went there of their own volition and...and...why was she *still* looking?! *Had* she hit her head? It was time to get away, clearly, though she couldn’t recall any other time she’d felt compelled to flee from physical contact with a man. Compelled by what? What the fuck was she afraid of? “Hereic and Avise will want to be here to examine all this, too, I imagine. Since they took the risk, it’s only fair not to spoil all the surprises.” She closed the book and turned to walk away, promptly falling over the crate containing the sphere.

Abnur, still deft in his advanced years, caught her around the waist before her face could connect with the floor or edge of the crate. He hoisted her upright, and her face flamed. Very briefly disregarding her embarrassment, Grace leaned back against him.

“Are you *trying* to injure yourself further?” His tone lacked its usual acid.

“Apparently, I require more rest than I thought.” She huffed. The arm clamped about her middle had not loosened, and she dared to look over her shoulder. Abnur’s brow was drawn together as he peered at her. “So, if you’d be so kind as to...” She lightly patted his arm with one hand, her wild imagination’s fantasized thoughts straining behind a rapidly weakening dam of better sense. His grip loosened and she stepped away, carefully this time.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t start any analysis until your head is pulled from wherever you’ve got it lodged. You’re useless like this.” Abnur folded his arms.

“Useless?” Grace scoffed indignantly. Unfortunately, she was at a complete loss, and no viable retort came to mind. She continued to word-vomit instead. “I’m *plenty* useful.” The talking needed to cease. “My head isn’t *lodged* anywhere, Abnur.” Lies. “I’m going to bed.” She headed for the door. “*My* bed.” Oh, gods, make it stop. “Goodnight.”

Tievus Venodius had been droning on for what felt like ages about proper color combination and contrast in relation to differing architectural styles. Or at least that was the last thing she’d heard before tuning him out to disappear into her own thoughts. Unfortunately, once she had finally fallen asleep, she overslept, and Tievus was in the apartment working by the time she emerged. He’d stopped her at once for this little chat.

By this time, Hereic and Avise would already be in her office getting started on their usual tasks. But those would run out quickly without her there to direct them. They were curious and would start poking around in her Dwemer artifacts. That would not be good...

"...and then, to my astonishment, he turned her around and bent her *over* the park bench."

"*What?*" Grace blinked and looked at Tievus. He stood with his arms crossed and his foot tapping impatiently.

"Oh, so *now* you're listening. I just regaled you for several minutes with the tale of what I encountered in the park yesterday while taking in the air." He shrugged. "It was sordid and juicy."

"I'm sorry, Tievus...I have a lot of work to do, an office full of artifacts that need to be inventoried and given identification numbers, and..."

"Yes, yes." He sighed. "I can't say I'm actually angry, considering that Nalea is very charming company." The housekeeper in question was passing through, and her face suddenly turned red, and she hurried out.

"You're trying to seduce the help?"

"I'm not trying." He winked.

"Rail the lot of them if you must, Tievus, but don't let Abnur catch you and stay on schedule." She offered.

"Not the lot, just one." Tievus gave an impish grin. "Truthfully, though, what do you think so far?"

Grace looked around where they stood in the main foyer. He had been working with his crew for almost a week; all gold and frilly trim had been removed. The walls above the wood paneling were deep red, and though the woodwork wasn't finished yet, it looked infinitely better than before.

"Yes, I think it's coming along nicely. Even unfinished, it's better than it was." She laughed.

"Indeed, it was painful even to be present for the demise of that gilded disaster." He agreed.

Grace reached her office at last and found Hereic busily transcribing the information from the various metal plates, and Avise organizing and laying out the pieces of the spider. Both looked happy to see her, at least.

"How are you identifying the components?" She went to Avise's side.

"I just replicated the same system you used for the other things you have, but incremented the letter and the number."

"Perfect! That's exactly what I need." Where had these assistants been for the whole of her life?

"How was venturing back to Rkundzelft with Abnur, Hereic?"

"Terrifying beyond reason." He smiled up at her, though.

"Abnur said the wards had held, though, and that you didn't encounter more automatons..."

"I wasn't referring to automatons."

“Oh, I’m sorry. He wasn’t too terrible, was he?” Grace winced.

“He said at one point that my continued existence was contingent on your good graces.”

“Ouch. Well, don’t take it personally. He’s mean to me, too.” She thought he was, at least. Though, to be fair, Abnur did seem to be significantly less vicious toward her than most others. But, he was never *nice*, was he? The closest to nice was during their academic discussions.

Taking the book that she and Abnur had been looking at the night before, she went to her desk to begin making her own notes. Her focus lasted an entire two pages of notes before her mind started to wander. Their contact had been brief, but it stuck in her memory, *distracting her*. What she needed was to put some distance between them. And it would be no easy feat, all things considered.

No Peace for the Wicked

4th of Frostfall

Three lovely days had passed tranquilly and without interruption from Abnur or anyone else who might have been troublesome. It was the morning of the fourth day, the office was silent. Hereic and Avise were off for the day, and Grace had genuine peace and quiet. She didn't mind her assistants at all, but there was something about the serenity of solitude that healed her very soul. There was no telling how long it would be until her luck ran out, as she knew very well it would.

The answer was five hours. Five undisturbed, solitary hours before the knock sounded on her door. With a heavy sigh, Grace bid the visitor to enter. She almost sighed again, as Abnur's personal valet, Decir, stepped in.

"What does Abnur want?" She sat back in her chair. "I mean, hello."

"I bid you good afternoon, Lady Tiradia. His Lordship, Chancellor Tharn, bid me to inform you that your presence is required tonight at the quarterly Elder Council dinner."

"Why, in the name of all that is sacred, would *I* be required at such a thing?" She got to her feet and shook her head. Her legs were a little stiff from sitting too long.

"It is customary, milady, for the councilmembers to bring a guest. In most cases, it is a spouse...." The valet explained. He didn't look nervous or bothered by her, but with his position as Abnur Tharn's valet, the man was probably fearless. He would need to be to serve such a master.

"I am not his wife."

"He bid me to remind you if you should respond that way, that he...is not concerned about such matters, and that..." He sighed just a little. "...you should know better."

"Of course." The unending audacity of that antagonistic bastard...Grace could tell that whatever Abnur had *actually* said, it was being passed through the much more genial filter that was Decir. "Who has he been taking to these dinners for the last seven years, then?" Apparently, that was one question the valet hadn't been prepared for, and he blinked, staring at her.

"No one, milady. Also, Lord Tharn said to dress accordingly and that when you return to the apartment, there will be individuals ready to dress you."

"To *dress* me? What am I, a child?"

"He said, milady, that your own wardrobe lacks the items a proper lady should wear to dinner." Decir didn't seem happy about the messages he gave her, but Grace imagined they certainly weren't the worst he'd been tasked with delivering.

"Oh, is that so? And why, might I ask, isn't Lord bloody fucking Tharn here himself if he wants to insult me?"

Decir, still stony-faced, let out a long breath. "Because you cannot throw a vase at him if he isn't

here.” She *had* thrown a vase at Abnur before, some years earlier. There’d been so many instances of somewhat explosive reactions, though. She couldn’t remember what nasty thing he’d said to provoke that particular response.

“Fine.” She sighed. “When is this dinner?”

“Eight o’clock, milady. It would be prudent, in my professional opinion, to return to the apartment soon to get ready.”

“It’s two o’clock...who spends *six* hours getting ready for anything?”

“Your choices are entirely your own, milady.”

The entire way back to Abnur’s apartment, Grace grumbled to herself. She *should* have simply said no. What would he do? He’d been going by himself all these years, why bring someone now? It seemed unnecessary. Was he *really* trying to hammer home the whole *mistress* thing? His wife was dead, the term mistress didn’t even apply! What did that make her, then? His lover? The word stuck in her unpleasantly...or disconcertingly pleasantly. It seemed more ridiculous each day, this *pretending*. What were the options, though? *Not* pretending? Well, there was not pretending in the sense that she went home to Nibenay and was no longer associated with him. Or there was not pretending and actually *being* what she was pretending to be. Option B seemed preferable, despite the desire to beat the man about the face with a chair leg.

To her horror, there were three women and a man she’d never seen before, patiently waiting for her arrival. Grace stared at them, and they stared back, no one saying anything. Tievus, of all people, strolled in and broke the silence.

“Ah! So you *are* taking my advice on fixing up all...*this*, too?” He gestured at her dress.

“Actually, I’m being dragged to a quarterly Elder Council dinner.” She scowled. “But thank you for your repeated disparaging opinions about my appearance, Tievus.” Hester emerged then.

“You *said* speak freely.” He shrugged.

“Fine, your mustache is ridiculous. Fix *that*.”

“I see your point.” Tievus reached up, assuring himself that the curled ends of his mustache were still perfect.

“Ah, milady. This way, to your rooms, so we can start.” Hester smiled apologetically as she gently led Grace away from the smarting designer, knowing full well how she felt about all this nonsense.

Be grudgingly, she tolerated the ministrations of those sent to *dress her*. She was already a fastidiously clean person, but two of the women had plopped her in a bath and scrubbed her within an inch of her life. The water was scented and treated with expensive soaps and oils.

Post bath, Grace was dried off, then lotions massaged into her skin. Was this really what the noble ladies endured every time they were to attend some event? This was ludicrous. She flinched as the man on the dressing-team entered the bath chamber, and she opened her mouth to chastise him for his invasion of her privacy, but he was completely unaffected by her nakedness.

“I do beg your pardon, madam. It is best to measure you this way.” He held up a tailor’s tape measure, his face completely professional.

“For...the dress?” She blinked, bewildered, and put her arms down. “Is there not one already made? I don’t understand...”

“Oh, it was completed a week ago.”

“A *week* ago?”

“We were given approximate measurements, this is to ensure you have the perfect fit, and that the garment accentuates your assets and shows the beauty of your figure.” The tailor explained. Grace glanced down at her bare breasts.

“Assets?”

“Precisely, madam.” He chuckled. “Do I have your permission to take measurements?”

“Alright.” She shrugged, and he stepped forward.

“Arms up, please.”

The tailor took an unthinkable number of measurements and wrote nothing down. He must have been talented, or Abnur would never have allowed him in for this. Abnur. Ugh...she’d almost forgotten. The tailor disappeared, and Grace donned a robe and was sat down to get her hair taken care of.

“Their skill is well beyond my own.” Hester perched on a stool opposite from her. “Are you looking forward to tonight?”

“Looking forward to be paraded around in front of a bunch of stuffy, up-tight nobility, which will likely include the Emperor and Abnur’s vile daughter? No, I’d rather sup with rabid wolves. They’d at least be kind enough to put me out of my misery.” Grace sulked. One of the women brushing her hair, stifled a laugh. Hester grinned, though.

“You see?” She looked at the other attendants. “I told you she was pleasant to work with.”

“You talk about me?” Grace had never really thought about others discussing her before. Part of not caring what others thought of her choices and actions was never thinking about whether or not it was discussed.

“Well...” Hester’s cheeks turned pink. “Most attendants simply expect...” She was clearly searching for diplomatic words.

“A bitch?” Grace helpful supplied, to the amusement of the woman doing her hair.

“Someone very *particular* about things.” Hester amended.

“Yes, well, I hate this, with a fiery passion. But that’s not the fault of any of you.” Grace sighed, though. “I suspect, however, that by the end of the night, I will be forced to reach deep into my Nibenese roots.”

Her hair took an excruciating amount of time. Though by the end, Grace couldn’t deny that it did, indeed, look lovely. She kept her hair longer than most, which had added to the time. It was swept back from her face, thin bands of gold holding it in place as small braids and twists met in a knot of sorts at the back of her head. There were delicate gold chains with glittering rubies strung

throughout. At the end, long, curled tendrils hung down past the center of her back.

“What do you think?” The younger of the two women in charge of her hair looked eager for feedback, perhaps even nervous. She was an apprentice to the older one, it seemed.

“I really quite like it, you’ve done a lovely job taming this mess into something civilized.” Grace smiled, and the girl let out a relieved breath, turning to her mentor, who nodded in approval. “If anyone asks, I will be sure to point them your way.” She didn’t think anyone would ask, unfortunately. Women at the Imperial court, more often than not, sought to tear one another down rather than build each other up.

The dress was a piece of art. It was a deep, crimson silk with small, gold thread accents. The edges had intricate embroidery, and Grace was almost afraid the dress would rip when they put it on her. But, the tailor had done his job well, and it fit perfectly. She’d never had anything so tailored to her form, before. The sleeves were forearm length, split along the top, but held together with delicate gold clips. The neckline was low and indeed accentuated her *assets*, as promised, but without making her feel exposed. It was almost backless with a plunging V that descended from her shoulders to her waist. The dress overall was far more comfortable than expected, and it wasn’t constricting.

“Chancellor Tharn insisted on the best and spared no expense,” Hester commented, watching as Grace stared at herself in the mirror. It had slipped her mind that all this was at his bidding. No one had even given her such gifts. These clothes, the office, assistants, all the Dwemer artifacts, the resources to explore, and do research... Part of her thought she should thank him, but she knew better. It was all part and parcel to the role she was playing, she needed to remember that. It was not sentiment, Abnur *abhorred* such foolishness and openly mocked anyone who didn’t.

“Milady?” Nalea entered the room.

“Hm?” Grace turned toward the housekeeper.

“The chancellor is ready and asked how long you will be.”

“I’m done, I think...” She turned to the team it had taken to make her look so lovely. They nodded in agreement, but the tailor jumped up.

“Shoes!” He quickly rummaged through a trunk and found a small box. Opening it, he took out leather, closed-toe sandals which had the same fabric as her dress and gold laces that tied around her ankles. Grace thanked whatever powers might be that they were flat!

“Alright,” She started, once the shoes were in place. “*Now*, I’m ready.”

Various people were flitting about the foyer, some were servants, others were some of Abnur’s aides and assistants. As with all high-profile Imperial parties, dinners, or whatever, each individual attending usually brought along one personal attendant. For Grace, it was Hester, obviously, who had donned what could only be described as a more formal version of the simple dress she usually wore on a day-to-day basis. Abnur, no doubt, would have more.

“Oh, my lady!” Tievus gasped, stepping out of the sitting room. Why he was *still* there, she didn’t know or care. “You...you certainly...”

“Shut it, Tievus.” She clipped, but smiled a little. “Reserve your aesthetic observations to architecture, if you please.”

“Of course, whatever you say, but...” He eyed her from head to toe, nodding appreciatively.

“About time you were ready.” Came Abnur’s voice as he emerged from his study. Tievus glanced back, gave Grace another wink, and scurried away to do whatever it was he was doing. She turned toward Abnur and saw at once that the sash on his black tunic was the same silk her dress was from. His eyes were on her, though, examining her not entirely unlike Tievus had. Except Abnur was better at keeping his thoughts *off* his face.

“We *match*? That’s appalling.” She sighed.

“Apparently, you don’t attend many functions as part of a pair.” His eyes were fixed on hers. He wore dark leather boots rather than sandals. Abnur Tharn simply did not wear sandals for any occasion. Somehow, for unexplained reasons, they were beneath him. Or he was afraid to show a little leg. It didn’t matter.

“I’ve managed my whole life until today to avoid attending any functions as a pair. So, thanks for that. I *had* hoped for the streak to go on for the whole of my existence.”

“If you die before we get there, then it will have.” He smirked.

“Are there any windows on the way that will open?” Grace couldn’t help her grin as amusement danced briefly across his face.

“I’ll be sure to have them heavily guarded. You’re coming to this damned dinner whether you like it or not.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll embarrass you? I’m rather crass, you know.”

“I’m counting on you scandalizing *them*. I don’t *get* embarrassed.” Abnur grabbed her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow.

It was strange to be escorted by guards in full, armored regalia, and their handful of attendants following behind at an appropriate distance.

“It’s come to my attention that our little ruse is more transparent than I thought.” Abnur kept his voice down, but wasn’t whispering.

“Seriously? People are *discussing* it?” She gaped.

“For such an intelligent person, you are painfully naive sometimes.” He sighed.

“Oh, *forgive* me for avoiding court and nobility and not picking up habits like mindless gossip and shit-talking that the witless *so* enjoy.” His words didn’t often bother her, but every now and then, he hit a nerve.

“Believe me, Grace, when I say this: I applaud your ability to avoid inane prattle and focus on more worthy pursuits including your libraries and feeding the poor. But to survive here, you must listen to the inane prattle and learn what you can. You’re smart enough to pick fact from fiction, it would serve you well to try.” He looked down at her, then moved the arm she was holding onto, tugging her a little closer. “Yes, it is discussed, of course. I’m the High Chancellor.”

“So they see it for what it is? A lie?”

“Perhaps, since we are not often seen together.” Abnur glanced around, but no one was *really* within earshot. Plus, he’d ensured that his own guards and attendants were trustworthy and could be depended on to not repeat anything they might hear.

“So, that’s what this is. Being *seen* together.”

“Yes, and you’ll have to be convincing, as if you actually like me.”

“When have I ever given the impression that I don’t?” Grace was feeling a little bold.

“Well, the incident with vase...”

“Why do you keep bringing that up? Do you want me to do it again?” She hissed. He gave what was almost an undignified snort. “I’m sure I can be convincing enough, but don’t expect me to simper and bat my eyes.”

“You’re a terrible liar, they’d never believe it if you did.”

Put On a Good Show

4th of Frostfall – Cont.

The tension that coursed through Grace was palpable, and it intensified the closer they got to the doors of the banquet hall. Her grip on Tharn's arm seemed to tighten like a vice with almost every step until he halted, let out an annoyed exhale, and pried her fingers up, readjusting her hand.

"Sorry." She looked sullen.

"Could you try *not* looking like a chastised dog being dragged out back to meet its end?" He narrowed his eyes at her, but she only glanced up briefly. She'd been avoiding him for several days, which was probably for the best.

"You have the luxury of always looking bored and displeased. Why should *I* appear delighted to be subjected to a room full of people I would sooner push off the tower than share a meal with?" She'd become a distraction, one that was simultaneously welcome and unwelcome. On occasions such as this, the degree to which she diverted his attention was appreciated. It meant not having to focus so much on the torture that was small talk with small minds.

When she cropped up in his thoughts unprovoked in the midst of his work, on the other hand, it frustrated Tharn to no end. Lust was the weakness of *common* men, one he had never been subject to. At least, not since he was a young man, and it had been a *very* long time since then. He was above such base needs. Yet the mere proximity of this woman was enough to turn his blood to fire. The urges he usually got were easily slaked at the local establishment in the city. For a few gold, his desire for release was met, and he could get back to work.

Even that was doing nothing to ease his yearning to be buried in her flesh. And to feel her writhe beneath him. He even imagined the sound of her breath, and her voice...the feel of her nails raking down his back as he...*gods damn* it all!!

Grace was staring at him now, he noticed, with a questioning look. The entire ordeal was made worse by the fact that she, too, was *affected*. Were she to be as appalled by him as every other woman, it could all be easily dismissed, and he'd get on with his life as he always had.

"We haven't been announced yet. We could still turn back..." She halted, upon hearing the doorman's voice and their names, then sighed. "Damn."

The dull roar of conversation grew quieter as they entered, and Grace shot Tharn an accusatory look. There were many more people present than just the councilmembers and their guests. But, had he told her it was a larger banquet, she would have vanished in order to avoid it.

His arrival at such events was usually met with an initial quieting and the slew of head nods and bows of respect. The difference this time was that he wasn't alone, and the whispers began as they craned their necks, looking from the woman at his side to him and back again.

"Great. I'm a fucking spectacle." She muttered only loud enough for him to hear.

"Did you expect otherwise?"

"No." She sighed, and Tharn leaned down a little. In part to whisper and in part to catch the scent

of her hair. It was sweet, but subtly fragrant like flowers. Not unpleasant; though, he preferred her usual aroma of plain soap, parchment, and old books.

“My darling daughter is approaching.” He knew how she despised Clivia. “So, you can get the most unpleasant conversation of the night over with first.” She replied with something even he was unlikely to repeat.

“Hello, father.” The most successful of his copious offspring approached, her nose in the air as was the way she carried herself since marrying Leovic. She was, of course, dressed in the highest fashion, jewels glittering from every possible surface she could have put them on. Her taste was, unfortunately, not unlike her mother’s.

“Clivia.”

“I didn’t realize you weren’t coming alone.” Her already pinched face grimaced further, looking at Grace.

“And?” Tharn gave a bored expression, knowing what came next. His daughter would do everything she could to provoke Grace, who would take it in stride and cut the interaction short with only one vicious but extremely effective snipe.

“Gratiaren.” His daughter turned to Grace. “It’s been quite some time since I’ve seen you roaming the palace. Last I knew, your hobbies included grave-robbing. Now I see your interests have evolved and you’ve whored your way back here.”

Grace merely chuckled, though; it was a particular sound from her that Tharn knew to be potentially dangerous. Her natural state was to be kindness itself to others, if not a bit absent-minded and lost in her own thoughts. But, it would be wise for all to remember that she was raised amongst Nibenese nobility. Her quick wit and sharp tongue could cut as deeply as his own when provoked, which was not a compliment he’d ever admit giving.

“As ever, you are a shining example that *good* breeding means very little.” She slid her hand farther up Tharn’s arm, standing even closer to him and gave the younger woman a sickly sweet smile. Clivia was nearly a decade Grace’s junior, and for all her education and training, she’d never learned to even pretend to be likable. It was a shortcoming for as ambitious as she was. He didn’t subscribe to the old adage of catching more flies with honey, because he didn’t care and didn’t need to. But to be adored as Clivia wished to be, it would have been a helpful skill. Anger flashed in the younger woman’s eyes, but she elected not to make a scene.

“Father, I had hoped to speak with you tonight, but circumstances as they are,” Clivia glared at Grace before looking back at him. “We can meet tomorrow morning in the chancellery.”

“Then, we will speak tomorrow. See to your other guests, Clivia.” He dismissed her as though she was *not* the wife of the emperor, and in truth, it was a bigger insult than any Grace could deliver. He saw the barely masked amusement on Grace’s face as the empress put her nose back in the air and strode away.

“Delightful, as always.” Grace reached out and grabbed a glass of white wine from the tray of a passing server, quickly draining it and putting it on the tray as another walked by.

“The less she bothers you, the more she hates you, I think.” He observed, taking a glass for himself.

“Why do you think I’m so unbothered?” She grinned, grabbing another full glass, but didn’t throw

the whole thing back this time. Tharn was almost disappointed; it would be entertaining, if nothing else, to see her verbally eviscerating these people so freely under the influence of drink.

Various other individuals and pairs greeted and paid their respects before moving on. Thankfully, most didn't hang around to chat for too long. Mostly, it seemed, they wanted to see what kind of woman the Chancellor had decided to take up with but not marry. Though, it occurred to Tharn that being unmarried but intentionally having a woman around that he appeared to enjoy, sent a particular message. It said that she was there for more than warming his bed and opening her legs; that they shared conversation and even interests, and perhaps they even liked one another.

Damn it. Why hadn't this occurred to him sooner? This wasn't the nonsense he wasted his energy thinking about, that's why. So why in Oblivion was he now?! The sound of her voice was agreeable, as she spoke to two other ladies who had approached them; it was womanly, not girlish. Grace had released his arm, and he wasn't listening to anything being said, but he politely let his hand rest at the small of her back.

Base desire had Tharn in its clutches, though. His fingertips trailed upwards, meeting with her bare back. Her skin was hot, telling of the fire that dwelled beneath it. He watched her reactions, subtle though they were. Her breasts heaved a little higher over the neckline of her bodice, her lips parted when she exhaled. A favorable response, so he didn't stop, sliding his hand farther up then back down. As the ladies departed and Tharn muttered his automatic responses, his fingers slipped beneath one edge of the back of her gown. She was so soft beneath his touch, and she drew a shuddering breath.

But councilmembers were approaching, and he managed to push it all down, taking his hand away from her. Yes, he was still in control, momentary weakness was merely that: momentary. He was Abnur Tharn, High Chancellor of the Elder Council...something as petty as desire couldn't and wouldn't interfere with that.

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Gods-damned bloody fucking bastard. Was he simply mocking her? Was he striving to make her uncomfortable in the presence of others for his own amusement? Grace took a few deep breaths now that Abnur had been led away by other councilmembers. They'd needed to talk about something that apparently couldn't wait. This had been a mistake. He was obviously aware of the effect he had on her and was pointing it out. Their entertaining verbal altercations were one thing, but his fingers against her bare skin...if it was for no reason but to torture her, then, no. She would not be continuing on, no matter how badly he wanted to avoid people trying to marry him.

It took her moment, but she calmed herself, sipping the wine she badly wanted to chug, eyeing the waiters and their trays full of full glasses. No, if she had too much, she would suffer in the morning. Once upon a time, she could have put away two or more bottles by herself and been fine. She wasn't quite so young anymore. She looked around, though, many people were still casting glances her way. It didn't matter, though. The place was big enough that they weren't entirely up in her

face, at least.

These banquet halls were used for many different occasions. It wasn't the largest in the White-Gold tower, by any means. The last time Grace had been in this particular one, however, had been many years ago when she was on the cusp of adulthood. She'd been forced to attend one of the annual balls held for the sole purpose of introducing young, eligible Imperial women to prospective husbands. Paraded about like prized cattle on an auction block, it was ridiculous. The hall was ideal for such monstrous uses as it was lined with many alcoves hidden by long curtains. But the drapes didn't shut all the way, there was a small gap through which the occupants could be seen still by chaperones. It was private enough for young couples to sneak away to talk or steal kisses, but not so private that they'd get away with more than that. That particular ball had been where Grace decided with certainty that she wanted nothing to do with marriage.

"Lady Tiradia?" A male voice came from behind. She turned and found herself face to face with the emperor himself.

"Oh, your grace." She curtsied appropriately. Wait, *shit*, wrong title...nobility...ugh.

"No, *you're* Grace." He gave a lopsided sort of smile, pausing for comedic effect. An awkward laugh bubbled up from inside her, and he seemed satisfied with that. "So I've heard that's your preference, anyway."

"My apologies, your majesty." Grace quickly amended. "Ah, yes, those who are familiar with me generally do address me as such." He nodded. Leovic was the latest emperor of the Longhouse dynasty. He was not particularly clean-cut, being a Reachman. Rough around the edges was about as politely as she could put it. He was odd and didn't fit with the Imperials at all, of course. Until that moment, Grace had never met him. "If you're looking for Ab—uh, the Chancellor, he stepped away to speak with others from the Council..."

"No, no." The emperor shook his head. "You seem to be the primary topic of discussion tonight, so I thought I'd at least form my own opinion."

"Great." She sighed. "Nosey gossips." His bushy brows arched high for a moment, oddly raising the crown he wore. It was almost funny.

"Don't worry, they'll go back to talking about how backward and unsuitable I am as a ruler." Leovic shrugged.

"You have a point, I suppose." Grace nodded, and he laughed, having likely expected her to contradict the self-deprecating comment.

"You're blunt, that must be why he likes you." He observed, and she could only stare dumbly, blinking, with no idea what to say. "Well, besides the obvious." The emperor gestured to her body, and Grace's mouth dropped open.

"Thank you...I think..."

"Well, I simply wanted to say hello. And now I can see you're not the ambitious, ladder-climbing tart they said you were." His grin implied it was a joke, and her eyes grew very wide as she decided to insult the emperor to his face.

"Yes, and now I know you're not the blood-drinking, cannibalistic savage they said *you* were." She offered. In truth, she still half-believed he *was* those things. He laughed aloud, though, and bowed. She curtsied again, and he walked away.

Grace let out a long breath, and this time *did* gulp the contents of her wine glass. She'd have happily gone her entire life, never speaking with Leovic. Yet another happy accident she could blame on Abnur.

"Milady." Hester's quiet voice came from behind, startling her, and she turned.

"What is it?"

"Apologies, but Chancellor Tharn asked that you meet him in the alcove by the blue chair."

"Why?" She frowned. It was a bad idea. Those alcoves meant things she didn't particularly think either of them should be perpetuating as fully grown adults. Though it would be an excellent opportunity to chew him out for whatever it was he was up to with the touching.

"I do not know; he seemed to want to get away from a particularly disagreeable conversation. Also, seating for dinner will begin in twenty minutes." Hester explained, bobbed a small curtsy then disappeared to wherever the attendants milled about, waiting to be called.

Grace looked around the expansive room; there were many alcoves. Usually, they were full of petting teenagers slobbering on one another. She spotted the identifying blue chair, though, and started toward it. Though she was trying to move naturally through the throng of guests and not draw attention, her journey did not go unnoticed. She could *feel* the eyes on her. Finally, she slipped through the hangings and found Abnur seated on a brocade settee.

"I just met the *emperor*." She hissed.

"How'd that go?" He got to his feet.

"I called him a savage, blood-drinking cannibal." Grace shrugged, and Abnur laughed aloud, which she had heard maybe one other time in her whole life. It was unnerving.

"Of course you did. He laughed, I'm sure." Abnur strolled toward her.

"He did." She fidgeted a little and folded her arms. "What are you doing *hiding* in here?"

"Taking a small break from the constant stream of people seeking favor." He was quite close. "We're being closely watched, of course."

"Oh, I am sure." Grace rolled her eyes. "I suppose plenty of them saw you putting your fingers in my dress. *That* must have been *plenty* convincing." Why was he standing so close to her?

"I didn't think you'd mind. Did you?" She wanted to slap the smug right off his face. This was the part where she was *supposed* to tell him yes, and that if he was going to mock her, she wanted no part of this ruse or whatever else it was that entertained him.

But she didn't mind. In fact, there was a whole list of where else she'd like his fingers. Her resolve was slipping, which he was perfectly aware of. The manipulative son of a bitch knew well how to play her. And how to pull each string to get each response. He was probably the only one who could.

"I'm sure it's very amusing for you." She snarled. "No doubt, it was sufficiently convincing that your stream of marriage proposals and inquiries will cease."

"Almost."

“*Almost?*” She spluttered. “What *else* do I have to do?”

“Endure this, to the best of your ability.”

“Wha—”

Abnur took her by the shoulders, pressing her back against the wall, then his mouth was on hers, and she inhaled sharply. It was for show, his lips didn’t move. *Or* he was especially terrible at kissing. More than likely, though, it was only meant to allay suspicions, to drive home his unavailability as a potential match for any who might be seeking to gain power or affluence.

It was a nothing gesture...until it wasn’t. While still having her quickly-dwindling wits about her, Grace decided on comeuppance for his little game. She reached down deep and mustered every shred of her own desire, then kissed him in earnest, pressing herself against his body.

Abnur leaned into her more. Some decorative molding on the wall, or some such thing, was digging into her back, but it didn’t matter. He tasted her, and she was open for him, the flavor of wine mingling between them. His tongue plunged and stroked, and he exhibited more skill with his mouth than she thought anyone as curmudgeonly as he was had *any* business having. But, she fought against letting go, even though she wanted to. Giving in would have been all too easy, but this was *not* the place for it, and she wanted badly to gain the upper hand, even briefly.

His hips pushed against hers, and she felt *him*, the hard ridge, pressing through the layers of tunic and dress. Even so simple a movement sent a brief, tingling ripple through her. A short and very quiet groan came from his throat, and Grace knew in that instant that...she...had...*won*. She knew then that it was not just the simple matter of Abnur tormenting her for whatever sadistic gratification it gave him.

She felt his hand on her thigh, just below her hip, as he was suddenly rucking up her skirt one inch at a time. Did he intend to have her right here against the wall? *Divines, yes!* Fortunately, her better sense was still in charge, and despite the almost painful ache for satisfaction, she was *not* about to let that happen. She pulled back, and her own hand gently stopped his industrious fingers from their inching just as a small bell rang. Ah, the dinner bell. Rarely was she blessed with perfect timing, but if ever there was a time for it, it was now.

“There.” She released him and slipped away, leaving him bracing himself against the wall, breathing hard and staring at her. Grace wore a triumphant smile. She’d won, yes, but at the cost of making things *so* much worse for herself. “I expect that was plenty convincing. But, ah, it seems you need a moment. I’ll be just outside.”

Incommodus Interruptus

5th of Frostfall

By now, Grace knew every single crack, line, and imperfection on the ceiling above her bed. Her newfound inability to sleep had gone well beyond being an annoyance. She hadn't crossed paths with Abnur for the entire day following the banquet. It wasn't intentional, at least on her part. She'd left him hanging in that alcove, he might have been a little perturbed by that. But, he'd earned it. The rest of the dinner had gone on as if nothing happened, except when she could feel his eyes on her.

The following night, Grace had paid Andian extra not to talk and not to be gentle. The effort was in vain. Regardless of how fruitful the Altmer's efforts were, it was without real satisfaction. Not just any man or mer would do. And so, she'd returned to her bed with as much fire in her veins as when she left. And there she still was.

Abnur's incredibly uncharacteristic behavior was cause for concern. And apparently, wakefulness, damn it all. He didn't give a skeever's ass about what people thought, and it didn't *really* matter if anyone believed the *ruse* or not. Though, she was beginning to question how much a ruse it even was anymore. His very apparent physical reaction to having her pressed up against a wall with his tongue in her mouth seemed to suggest it was less of a ruse and more of an inevitability. Not that she was complaining.

The real mystery was why either of them was hesitating.

Morndas morning, Hereic barreled into Grace's office, frazzled as ever, after being ambushed by some of the senior archivists and resident scholars. He'd been instructed to inform her that in the afternoon, several of them would be coming to the office. They wanted to know just what precisely that prime space was being utilized for. It had been only a matter of time before at least one of them was outraged enough at Abnur's demand that the others would comply and find out what exactly was going on.

It was no matter to prepare a presentation, she had plenty of material and things that would impress even the White-Gold Tower scholars.

"So, they're just going to demand to be shown what you've been up to?" Avise, for some yet-to-be-determined reason, was deeply affronted by the imminent imposition. "That's outright rude, I would say. Don't they know who you are?" It wasn't particularly appealing to Grace to gain importance for no reason other than the assumption that she was sleeping with Abnur. She bristled at that thought. Having her entire identity be centered on her perceived involvement with him simply would *not* do. But, right now wasn't the time to get worked up over that.

"I can't really blame them for wanting to be assured that the space is being used as it should be. In their place, I might feel similarly." She put a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"They could have, at the very least, given you a day to prepare. Mere *hours*? Ridiculous." Avise

harrumphed and dropped herself indelicately into a chair.

“I’ve got partial translations of various plates, transcriptions, observations...” Hereic’s voice was muffled as the entire upper half of him was in the cabinet he’d claimed as his own. He rummaged noisily, pulling out papers and notebooks. Both assistants seemed unnecessarily anxious about the whole thing.

“What’s the matter? Why is it such a problem that I have to prove my work is useful?” Grace frowned a little. “I want to be recognized for my efforts as much as anyone else.” Avise folded her arms, petulance intensifying.

“If they determine, for any reason, that your projects *aren’t* worthwhile, they will send us to work for some other scholar or archivist.” She let out a long breath.

“We all know this work is well beyond worthwhile. The two of you have played an important role in making some amazing discoveries...” Grace shook her head. It seemed impossible that anyone would deny the viability of such projects. Though, she may have been a little biased. If they could understand certain aspects of Dwemer technology, they could advance the Empire well beyond any dissenters that might arise.

“Well, politics.” Hereic sighed, sitting beside his cupboard.

“Let’s hope then that today they feel like valuing knowledge and education over political bullshit. Still, though, I wouldn’t worry if I was you. I’m not *entirely* above abusing my connections to get my way, especially if it’s to help the two of you.” Grace grinned as she finally got a small smirk out of Avise. Hereic nodded in approval.

The conflicting information regarding the focus and interests of those in charge of the Imperial Archives was disconcerting. Some accounts stated they valued knowledge and merit, but, today it seemed there were concerns regarding whether or not the invasion of her office was politically motivated. If it was, it didn’t make much sense. She was there at Abnur’s behest, and that meant facing *his* wrath should they, in his eyes, step out of line. That man led the Elder Council and had spent over a hundred and six years stabilizing and holding the Empire together no matter whose backside was warming the Ruby Throne at any given time. And he didn’t do it by being a ray of sunshine.

No, it wasn’t politics that had ruffled the archivists’ feathers. Grace was perfectly happy to oblige them if their inquisition had to do with the appropriate allotment of resources. It really *was* a very nice office. She’d begun wondering who’d been displaced to make room for her, which inspired the increasing feelings of guilt. She wasn’t there in an official capacity, she was simply encroaching on their space for her own curiosity. It didn’t seem fair not to be giving back. Perhaps there was an arrangement they could come to so that the collections housed there also benefitted from her work. She’d need to speak with one of them *after* the little dog and pony show.

“You’re remarkably calm,” Hereic observed.

“I know. It probably seems unfair.” Grace tried to lighten the mood.

“Well, you’re much safer than we are.”

“You’re perfectly safe, like I said.” She smiled.

“Are you planning to wow them or bore them? Either could go well for you depending who

comes.” He flipped through the notes she’d put together.

“I thought very seriously about putting the dynamo core into the sphere, but Abnur would be livid.” She smirked at the prospect.

“Because it would attack, maim, and/or *kill* several senior archivists?” Hereic’s brow furrowed a little at the somewhat demented glint of amusement in her eyes.

“Hm? No, because he wants to be there to see one activated outside a ruin. He could find more archivists; it’s less likely to find both another sphere *and* an operational core.” She looked over at Hereic. He sat with an expression of interest and horror mixed on his young face.

“I’m deeply concerned, but also very curious about the degree of nonchalance you exhibit toward the possibility of your projects taking the lives of others.”

“I *care about others*. But I’m not going to be bothered by *hypothetical* mass murder. I would, of course, feel appropriately guilty if someone *were* to get hurt.” She offered.

“Is that...a possibility for today?” Now he looked more worried than curious. “*What* are you planning?”

“No, nothing like that.” Grace laughed, though.

“You’re easy to like, milady, but no less terrifying for it.”

“Oh, thank you, Hereic.” She beamed.

“You see, that’s not *supposed* to be a compliment.” He shook his head, smiling, though, before going to triple-check his own notes.

The heavy, authoritative knock on the door finally sounded, and five people simply let themselves in. Grace got to her feet as first a tiny, white-haired wisp of a woman entered, followed by a hunched old man. Next in was a gentleman of planetary mass, sweating profusely into his mutton chops. He adjusted his spectacles, which were much too small for his voluminous face. Following him, to her surprise, was the physician who had seen to her injuries after Rkundzelft. Lastly was an impossibly beautiful, raven-haired woman who Grace, unfortunately, did recognize. Her name was Emedia Audtidenius.

“Good afternoon...” It didn’t seem this could go well with Emedia amongst them. She was as vicious as she was beautiful, but kept most people convinced that she was sweetness itself. Obviously, Grace was not one of those people. They’d brushed shoulders very briefly in the past at various gatherings of scholars. It had not gone well.

“Lady Tiradia, it is good to meet you at last.” The wisp woman stepped forward. “I am Rasania Antel.” She gestured to where the old man had been standing, but he was hobbling toward a chair. “That is Ortis Antel. This is Mecelius Pelick and Emedia Audtidenius. I believe you are already acquainted with Dr. Bradian Dexitullian.”

“Ah, yes, hello again, doctor. And welcome, all of you.” She smiled in what she hoped was an appropriately pleasant way and that her glass face for once would *not* betray her. Ortis Antel was sitting on his chair, already nodding off. Grace, wondering if the chap was alright, glanced at Rasania, who just shook her head a little. Apparently, this was the norm.

“So. Tell us, what have you been doing?” Mecelius Pelick wheezed and then made his way to the work tables. He peered at the items in their varying states of deconstruction.

“At present, I have been examining and documenting the Dwemer artifacts we recently obtained from Rkundzelft. One project involves reassembling a spider automaton, though, rest assured there is no core to power it. We are hoping to discover some part that runs in tandem with a dynamo core that controls decision-making, perhaps, or processes instructions.”

“Have the scholars of the Arcane University not already done such things?” Emedia swept over to the tables, wrinkling her nose at the contents.

“They’ve done significant research into the *arcane* aspects of the Dwemer automatons. The magic that is instilled in their engineering, but as for the hardware itself and the mechanical properties of remote instruction, no, they have not.” Grace somehow kept her voice calm, though still chilly.

“You know, I’ve *been* to the university myself...” The haughty bitch started up again but was interrupted when Rasania put up a hand.

“Enough. Gratiaren, you ventured *into* the ruined city? On your own?” The ancient woman asked, eyeing the tomes. They were coveted by all, but heavily warded against being removed from the office, and for good reasons.

“Chancellor Tharn agreed to accompany me, and my assistants also came.” Grace bristled as Emedia prodded some of the more delicate contraptions.

“The chancellor has, on several occasions, now touted your worthiness of such a space and our resources. He seemed particularly displeased when we informed him we would be auditing your current work.” Mecelius squinted at Grace. “What do you hope to accomplish by your research, Lady Tiradia?”

“It all begins with my own curiosity, the desire for answers, and the need to understand how their complex, advanced engineering works. There is also the possibility of application once we have tested and learned the intricacies of their technology. The things the Dwemer were capable of over two millennia ago were so far beyond what we know now. To unlock some of that knowledge, instead of simply hoarding it away, to preserve and protect the Empire...I feel that’s a worthy goal.” She glanced back to where Hereic and Avise were standing silently. Both nodded in agreement, and Avise covertly gave a thumbs-up.

“A noble cause, indeed.” Rasania approached. “Once the chancellor informed us that we would be accommodating you, rather than submitting a requisition, we made it our business to dig up whatever publications you may have made over time.” Emedia stepped up again, bitterness in her brown eyes.

“Many of us didn’t find it reasonable to simply turn over such wide access to such an important repository of information. The Imperial Archives store thousands of years of records. Not *everyone* should be allowed access simply because...”

“I had *nothing* to do with his demands...” Grace started, her anger flaring up, but Rasania held up a hand again, commanding silence, then cast a glare at Emedia.

“Hold your tongue, you harpy.” The old woman snapped. Somehow, by some miraculous force, Grace didn’t laugh aloud at the outrage on the younger woman’s face. Rasania continued, though. “Don’t worry, we are all accustomed to Abnur Tharn. His demands were not reflected on you. No matter what *some* would have us believe. And after the *senior* councilmembers of the archives

explored your already-published works, it was decided that we would comply.”

“I’m pleased you saw my merit.” With another brief glance at the assistants, she saw them watching eagerly as if waiting for a fight.

“In part, we voted in favor because you will be good for this place, your reverence for history and knowledge comes from a place of humility. And you’ll be good for Hereic. The boy shakes like one of those tiny dogs the noblewomen like to carry around.” Rasanía laughed as Hereic’s mouth dropped open indignantly. “*And* you dragged him into a fire fight deep inside Dwemer ruins after being here for less than a week!”

“Ah, well...” Grace wasn’t sure what to say. This wasn’t turning out as expected, but that wasn’t a bad thing.

“I think I have seen all I needed to see.” Mecelius rumbled, giving his surroundings a nod. Ortis snored quietly behind them. His cane slipped through his fingers and hit the floor, though, jolting him to consciousness.

“Charming gardens!” He gasped, blinking, then glancing around. “Oh...”

“I agree. I didn’t have many doubts about you occupying this space, but some dissenters will not rest until you give in or stuff a rag in their mouths.” Rasanía rolled her eyes, and it wasn’t a long logical leap to figure out who she meant.

“You may not object to preferential treatment of strangers because of who they spread their legs for, but I do. There were plans for this office before *she* barged in.” Emedia huffed. Poor Ortis looked absolutely scandalized. Mecelius wanted no part of it and flung open the door, departing at once.

“My dear, you’ve made it clear often enough that you’re upset you weren’t granted this space. But believe me when I tell you that your pretty face would not have set you ahead of the others who might have used it.” Rasanía growled. For so tiny and old a woman, her fierceness was not to be trifled with. “At this moment, you’re making a fool of yourself. If you’d like to maintain your spot in these archives, you will cease your adolescent wailing.” Emedia looked fit to burst, and Grace watched with barely veiled amusement. “I bid you good day, Lady Tiradia. Ortis! Wake up.”

“Hm? Yes, dear...oh, is it time for dinner?” With a wince, Ortis Antel heaved himself to his feet, leaning on the cane.

“Yes. Come along now.” Rasanía took hold of her husband’s arm, leading him out the door.

“Your days in here are numbered, Gratiaren.” Emedia hissed, ignoring the presence of the good doctor who had thus far not uttered a word. Grace smiled pleasantly at her, though.

“If you say so, Emmy.” She shrugged her shoulders, not at all bothered by the huffing and puffing of this nemesis. Emedia Audtidenius was more than the archivist scholar she portrayed herself as. She’d been born into nothing and took whatever route she could into the White-Gold Tower. She was not a stupid woman, but she did seek to remove anything in her path.

“Mark my words...”

“Oh, they’re marked, don’t you worry.” The smile remained on Grace’s face as Emedia stomped toward the door. “Fucking bitch.” Dr. Dexitullian coughed in shock, and the raven-black head whipped around.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. Now, get out of my office.” Grace let out a long breath as the door slammed, and she turned to her last remaining guest. “I take it you weren’t with them, you just happened to have bad timing?”

“Yes, indeed, my dear.” He cleared his throat. “That woman, she certainly seems to be someone to be wary of.”

“That’s what she’d have you think. So, what can I do for you today?”

“How are you feeling?” He asked.

“I’m very well, but I suspect you’re not here for my health.” She moved toward him, and he shook his head.

“Indeed not, though it is good to know you’ve recovered fully. I need to speak with you and your assistant, Avise.” He motioned for the girl to come over to them, and looking baffled, she approached.

“Is...something the matter?” She fidgeted. Grace shrugged, though, knowing as much as she did.

“You’ve been accepted into the Physicians’ Guild, young lady, to begin your training as a healer.” Bradian Dexitullian announced. Her jaw dropped open. “What you did to assist Lady Tiradia was nothing short of exceptional for one so young *and* without training.”

“I don’t understand.” She breathed. “I tried so hard to get in before and was rejected...”

“Well, bad policy is to blame for that, I’m afraid. We nearly missed out on having you because of it.” His smile was warm and welcoming.

“I...this is amazing.” Avise beamed, but then her face fell. “But...I still want to work here, too...”

“That’s been accounted for. One day a week, and any time you’re not required at the guild, you may still work the archives with Lady Tiradia. If you wish.”

“My family cannot afford tuition...”

“Scholarship.” The doctor grinned. “Worry not, all will be taken care of. All *you* need to do is work hard.”

“I’m speechless...”

“For once.” Grace nudged her with an elbow, eliciting a broad grin.

“Did you...?” Avise started, but the doctor interrupted.

“You start next Morndas. Now, I’d like a private word with the lady, if you please.” He dismissed the assistant who immediately scurried over to Hereic to deliver the news.

“You decided this *just* from seeing what she did about my wounds?” Grace narrowed her eyes. It seemed unlikely. The Physician’s Guild was incredibly difficult to get into.

“That *was* part of it...”

“And the *other* part?” She folded her arms, but already had her suspicion.

“Indeed, it is a scholarship, my lady. She was sponsored by a reliable source. Her tuition is covered. Anything previously paid for her study here has been sent back to her family so that they will not struggle so much. Though I am of the mind that the amount was vastly overestimated, but that is neither here nor there. I am not one to meddle in finances!”

“And this *generous* benefactor?”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge...”

“Uh-huh.”

Grace had never been to the Elder Council chambers before. Her footsteps echoed across the vast chamber. It was circular and made of white marble. It was interesting that the council sat at a round table, giving the illusion of all their opinions mattering. Yet, they had a chancellor who frequently did whatever he wished regardless of their thoughts.

Beyond the main chamber, through a door, was a wing where the chancellery was located. The bustling staff there seemed to halt very briefly as she entered, exchanging glances, before scurrying along to their tasks. She approached the desk of the secretary, and the man stared up, looking uncertain.

“Is the chancellor in?” Was Abnur having a bad day? Was that why they looked so frightened? Or was this their usual state?

“Yes, milady, he is...”

“Good, thank you.”

The door was open, and she saw Abnur sitting behind a large, ornate desk. His attention was on the documents in his hand. Her decision was made in that instant. When she pushed the door closed, he glanced up, unsurprised to see her.

“Can I help you?” He looked back at his work.

“I did not come for help.” She leaned her hands on his desk, and his eyes moved from the parchment and dragged down to the front of her dress and the view it gave him.

“Then, what?”

“You...did a good thing.” And he would be rewarded for it. Inwardly she scoffed at herself; she’d be doing this regardless of his secret charity.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Abnur was an excellent liar. But, he was a successful politician, so, of course he was.

“No matter.” She had no expectation that he would own up to a good deed and tarnish his reputation as a ruthless, unfeeling bastard. Standing up straight again, she moved around the desk and gently took the papers from his hands and set them aside before sitting in his lap. He arched one brow at her.

“Subtle as ever, Grace.” He could feign annoyance at the intrusion all he wanted, but he wasn’t stopping her. She knew him; if the business was pressing, she could have walked in naked, and it would have made no difference.

“I’m not very good at subtle.”

“I have noticed.”

“It’s late in the afternoon, perhaps you could take a break.” She was *done* denying herself what she wanted.

“I don’t take breaks.” His gaze shifted to her mouth, and her insides clenched happily.

“There’s a woman in your lap, Abnur. *Pause* your incessant work and see to her.” She leaned closer and could feel his breath.

“Are you always so demanding?” He didn’t give her the chance to respond, kissing her instead. Every nerve in her body was alight, and she tasted him. The feel of his tongue against hers sent bolts of sensation shooting downward. Grace took his face between her hands, and Abnur held onto her.

Her pulse thrummed; her resistance was no more. It was going to happen eventually, why not now? One hand moved up her side and over her breast, massaging gently, but he kissed her harder. As she pressed her backside a little firmer against his lap, he groaned softly.

“Damn it.” He whispered, and grabbed her by the waist, surging to his feet. Abnur sat her on the edge of the desk, his eyes burning into hers. “Here? Now?” He had to be sure, of course, about what she wanted.

“Why not?” Grace breathed.

“I can’t take my time here.” Only Abnur Tharn could look as if he was weighing the pros and cons of a willing and ready woman sitting on his bloody desk.

“Then, we can *savor* it later.” She reached down between his legs, finding the rigid length of him. She wasn’t the only one who was ready. He inhaled sharply.

“Very well, have it your way.” With haste, he rucked up her skirt as his lips were almost bruising hers. She felt his long fingers along the inside of her thigh and gasped as he slipped one inside her. Grace gripped his shoulders, and his eyes were wide, eager. “So you *do* want it.” He moved his hand a little, sending torturous ripples of pleasure through her, and she squeezed around him. Abnur’s lips parted as his eyes seemed to darken. “Don’t forget, I warned you that I cannot take my time.”

“Then stop wasting all your time babbling!” She growled. He took his hand away and to her shock, put the wet finger in his mouth as he made an appreciative sound. Her jaw dropped. He started pulling up the front of his tunic.

Heavy, purposeful footsteps thumped against the hardwood outside the chamber door, getting closer. Abnur halted.

“No, no, no...” Grace whined.

“*Damn it!*” He snarled. “You made me forget.” He backed up, and she wanted to scream in raging frustration.

“I didn’t *make* you anything!” She snapped back, shoving her skirt down just as the door swung open. She noted then that it hadn’t even been closed all the way, she didn’t remember hearing the latch. Her cheeks burned hot, and she got off the desk as the secretary entered with a tall, older

Colovian man.

“My lord Tharn, Saephon Aquilarios, Duke of Chorrol.” He announced.

“I beg your pardon, Chancellor. I didn’t realize you were...occupied.” The duke chuckled, intending every bit of lewdness in his tone.

“Lady Tiradia was just on her way out,” Abnur replied, still standing carefully behind his desk. He *almost* looked apologetic. The only consolation was that he was suffering as much as Grace was.

“Lady *Gratiaren* Tiradia?” The duke stopped her. “Silero’s daughter?”

“The very same.” She breathed, struggling to keep the irritation from her voice.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady. And do please accept my apologies.” He grinned, and she didn’t really like it. Giving a curt nod, she left, fully intending to soak in an *icy* bath.

Deception

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains an attempted sexual assault.

6th of Frostfall

Even Abnur Tharn needed to take several deep breaths after that little incident before he could adequately address the newly arrived duke. A lesser man would have been useless for at least half an hour. He strode to the cabinet and poured two glasses of wine, handing one to Duke Aquilarios. Pointedly, Tharn avoided looking at his desk where several things had been knocked over, and the documents were quite wrinkled.

“You know, I’d heard mention that the High Chancellor had elected not to marry again, now I see why. I wouldn’t either!” The duke gave a bawdy laugh, draining his glass. Tharn silently reminded himself that Colovians were still preferable over Reachmen. He needed this meeting. “Such a lovely piece, she is, too, Tharn.” But he didn’t have to like it.

“Now that you got that out of your system, can we get to business?” Tharn gave him a level look. To maintain his focus, he had to pretend that nothing had happened and that *she* didn’t exist. He was that much more irritated that his own self-control was so questionable lately. The duke’s visit was not a surprise, Tharn knew the schedule, *and* what time it was. Nevertheless, he’d nearly... Damn it all.

“Well,” The duke glanced at the door and saw that it was indeed closed now. “Let’s talk about your emperor then.”

“The most important and valuable resource we have right now is patience. Revolution doesn’t happen overnight.”

“Not successfully, anyway.”

“Precisely.” Tharn sipped his wine. “The Longhouse emperors have been in place for almost forty years, and I think everyone’s had just about enough.”

“Why not simply wait for your daughter to produce an heir and then...well, do what needs to be done, and put a regent in place until the whelp is of age?” The duke offered and sat down heavily on one of the settees. Tharn paced. He was jittery...unfulfilled.

“Do you think I hadn’t thought of that? It was the first thing that came to mind when he married Clivia without permission! It’s become apparent, though, that one of them is barren, or she refuses his bed. She won’t say in any case, so something else must be done.” The Empire deserved a *good* leader, one that would do what was best for the people. Leovic was eccentric and an outsider at best, and as Grace had said, a blood-drinking cannibal at worst. He almost smiled at the thought. *Focus, you bloody fool!*

“And so, you think sitting down with the regional dukes and leaders who despise Reachmen will get the wheels turning, so to speak.” The duke nodded. “Plausible.”

“I must very carefully test the waters. Dissent amongst the majority doesn’t secure a victory. There are a *lot* of Reachmen and some Imperials who *are* loyal to him.” Tharn poured himself more wine.

“You realize, Tharn, that you’re setting yourself up as a traitor.”

“If being a traitor is what it takes to protect the Empire, then so be it. I’ve gotten my hands dirty many times over the years; there is nothing I won’t do to preserve this realm.”

Grace had sat in the cold water until her skin was numb. Hester paced the bedroom fretting over the strange mood she was in. But finally, it had receded. There would be time with Abnur eventually. He was a busy man, but there would be a reprieve *somewhere*.

She dressed and threw herself into her work, beginning to attempt some translation in earnest with Hereic. It was slow work and required meticulousness and focus. It was perfect for keeping Abnur off her mind as well as that bitch, Emedia. Though in the case of the latter, Grace had definitely kicked a hornet’s nest. It was a surprise to see her flash more of her true colors during the archivists’ visit to the office. But then, none there could have been swayed by charm or good looks.

Where Emedia’s hatred for Grace stemmed from, she wasn’t entirely sure, but she thought it had to do with their vastly different origins. Emedia had worked her way up from nothing; it was impressive and would have been more so if she wasn’t so willing to destroy people she viewed as obstacles. There was little doubt that she’d achieve her goals, Grace didn’t care to stop her or get in her way. She simply wanted to be left to her work.

Exhaustion had settled over her by the time she returned to the apartment. It had grown late, but the footman said Abnur wasn’t back yet. To bed it was, alone. Again. Truly, she was too tired, anyway. Not that it stopped her dreams from running rampant with bits and pieces from the day.

In the morning, there still was no trace of Abnur. Perhaps he’d begun to regret that little almost-tryst on his desk. She didn’t like the uncomfortable sensation such thoughts planted in the pit of her stomach. Such ruminating was dangerous, and it wasn’t like her. Abnur disappeared for days all the time. After reminding herself of that, she got to work with Hereic and Avise.

Hours ticked by, and despite concentrating on the Rkundzelft tomes, the prodding concern stabbed at her incessantly, like a tiny, annoying squirrel with a hatpin.

When there was a knock on the door, Grace nearly tipped her chair over as she leapt up and beckoned the visitor in. Disappointingly, it was just a messenger, one she didn’t recognize who was not one of Abnur’s.

“Lady Tiradia, my master, Saephon Aquilarios, Duke of Chorrol requests that you please dine with

him this evening as there are matters to discuss that you will be interested in.” He recited. She stared for a moment and blinked. What in Oblivion could that man want to talk with her about?

“I...alright. Fine. When?” She sighed.

“Promptly at seven o’clock, madam.”

“Very well, thank you.” Grace checked the time; it was already almost a quarter past five. “The two of you had better get going.” She returned to the assistants. “I didn’t realize it was so late in the day.”

“Is...everything alright?” Avise’s brow creased with concern.

“Yes, of course.” Grace tried to smile reassuringly. No, everything wasn’t alright. She’d been mentally reduced to an idiotic adolescent. Though, perhaps Abnur would be at the dinner with the duke. If they had a lot of business to conduct, it made sense that he’d be there.

Grace wore a simple blue dress and allowed Hester to dress her hair. She felt a little strange that the duke had invited her. Her mind whirled away on all its scenarios. Though, if Abnur were going, Decir would have come to tell her, and they’d go together. Ugh! She needed to put it out of mind! Perhaps the duke did business with her grandfather. Many nobles did, for their horses. Tiradian stallions were highly prized.

One of the footmen escorted Grace through the palace and to the guest quarters. In part, she didn’t want to be observed going to see the duke by herself. People were welcome to speculate about her private activities with Abnur, but only him. The other part was that she didn’t know exactly how to get there; it just wasn’t part of the tower she ever had cause to visit.

Outside the duke’s suite, his own guards were posted, and the nearest palace guard was some distance down the corridor. The footman opened the door without a word, and ushered her in. Then he no doubt would return to his station. She’d have one of the palace guards show her how to get back.

The sitting room had been made into a dining area, where a small table, already set, was waiting. It was set for two. Grace glanced around and found the suite itself to be entirely without guards or staff. Was there some secret thing going on with Abnur that he wanted to discuss without being listened to? That would at least be interesting.

“Lady Tiradia.” The duke’s booming voice startled her, and she looked up at him. “My apologies. Welcome.”

“Thank you, your grace.”

“Just Saephon, please.”

“Alright.” Despite knowing the answer already, she asked the question. “Is the chancellor not joining us?”

“Ah, no, he is not. I’d thought to have a private dinner, so we might talk.”

“What could you possibly want to talk to *me* about?” Grace wasn’t feeling particularly disposed to breaking out her fancy manners for a strange duke who seemed to be behaving strangely as well.

“We can talk about whatever you’d like.” His smile was hiding things, she could tell that much.
“You are researching the Dwemer, correct?”

“I am, yes.”

“Interesting. Let’s eat and discuss it.” He seemed overly intent on having conversation with her. What was the point of all this? He took the metal domes off their meals and set them aside, things attendants should have been doing. She knew for a fact that guests were provided attendants if they didn’t have their own.

“Of course. Though, I’d thought you wanted to discuss business or the Tiradian equestrian trade.” She let him push her chair in for her. He was dressed differently from the day before, now wearing only a belted tunic, leggings, and boots. Colovians were different from the Nibenese in many ways. Style of dress, traditions, manners.

“Not particularly. How is old Silero, anyway?” The duke poured them wine then started cutting his meat.

“He is well.” Grace picked up her cutlery, feeling a little uncomfortable. “With the chancellor here in the city, he is ensuring things are taken care of in Nibenay.”

“Yes, yes.” He nodded then shook his head suddenly. “I don’t want to talk about your family. Tell me about what you do.”

“Forgive me, but I’m not sure you’d find much interest in the intricacies of Dwemer engineering or the delicate but hearty magic they wove into their creations.”

“Because I’m Colovian?”

“Because you’re a fighter, not a scholar.” It was plain enough to see. He was very tall and powerful despite his age, and he walked like a soldier. He chuckled at her assessment.

“You’re clever.” He pointed at her with one large, meaty hand. “Alright, what *else* do you do?”

“I’m not sure what kind of conversation you’re looking for, your grace.” She’d decided she was *not* going to address him informally. “I am a scholar and sometime explorer of old ruins.”

“No social engagements?” He was fishing for something, and she didn’t want to believe it was of an inappropriate nature, but the lewd grin on his face the day before made her think it was.

“Why don’t you tell me about your endeavors as the duke of Chorrol?” Grace didn’t much like talking about herself anyway, especially to strangers.

The ploy worked, and Duke Aquilarios launched into a long-winded bout of self-praise and promotion. She didn’t have to partake at all, merely nodding here and there while she picked at her food. Her appetite had vanished upon arrival.

“Here, have more wine.” He crooned, when dinner was finished.

“No, thank you, I don’t think I will...” Before she could finish declining, he’d put a full glass in her hand. He watched expectantly, so she convincingly pretended to take a sip. Things were getting more odd.

“Good, good.” He seemed pleased.

“Look, your grace, I really must go, I have a lot of work to do in the morning...” She should have just told him to cork it and get out of her way, but she was getting nervous. Her fingers were cold, and she couldn’t feel her fire. Her heart rate accelerated.

“Nonsense, sit, and talk with me.” He moved closer, and she took a step back. This repeated until her back was against a pillar.

“Your grace, I must insist.” She reached for the spark, the spark that had never before in her entire life abandoned her. In its place, she found fear and emptiness. How would she get away? She was a tall woman, but he was twice her size easily. Without a weapon...there was nothing she could do.

“I want you to stay.” He loomed over her.

“Yes, I’ve gathered that. But I would like to leave.” Her voice shook, she didn’t understand why or how one man could just whisk away her strength. Was there something in the food? Had he given her some sort of drug? He made an irritated sound and backed away from her.

“You know, I thought you were going to be a good sport.” He eyed her over his glass as he took a gulp.

“*What?*” Grace blinked. He was expecting her to willingly bed him. Why would he have gotten that idea? *How?*

“I saw you yesterday, through the open door of Tharn’s office, on his desk.” The smile that spread across his face was ominous, and he took a step toward her again.

“I am leaving.” She turned to the door, but he quickly blocked her way. Again, and again she reached for the flame that lived inside. Her weapon, her warmth, that which had protected her since she was a girl. But still, nothing. The arcane had forsaken her. *Why?*

“No, you’re not.” He chuckled. “I was promised that you’d satisfy me.”

“By *who?*” A sick feeling crept up inside her.

“I can promise that my prowess as a *man*...” The duke grabbed his groin in illustration. “...will far outstrip that old battlemage.” He was moving toward Grace again, and she grew frantic. “You’re his plaything, but sharing promotes goodwill.” So many things were bombarding her simultaneously that it was impossible to even focus on one of them. Icy terror had wrapped its fingers around her spine. Horror at the implication that she’d been sent here to *entertain* the duke by Abnur brought the bile up in the back of her throat. He wouldn’t do that to her, would he? She mattered, *didn’t she?*

“I am not a plaything; I am a *person*.” What kind of business could Abnur have with this pig that meant trading her body like currency?

“What’s your end of the bargain, anyway? He didn’t say. What does he give you so that you lay down with him, hm?” The duke took another step, and she couldn’t move back, the settee was right behind her. The bargain...indeed there was one. But they had never *actually* slept together, she had never actually whored herself to him. But, almost...

“You’re disgusting, how dare you suggest...” She searched, shaking, hoping for wit, or anything. “You fucking swine, you think to bully me into...” He hit her hard.

Grace saw stars and blackness, then she was on the floor. The duke came down over her. He leaned down close and inhaled the scent of her hair.

“Mm, sweet.” He murmured.

“No. Get off. Let me go...” Struggling even as hard as she could did exactly nothing.

“I don’t think so.” He bruised her wrists, gripping them in one hand, and tore the neck of her dress with the other to expose her breasts. He tried to stick his tongue in her mouth. Grace bit him, and he roared then hit her again. Her entire head was throbbing, and she clenched her teeth. Why? Why was this happening? He yanked at her skirts, pulling them upward. Why couldn’t she stop him? Why was she weak? She should fight harder...

He ground his hips against her, a low chuckle in his throat as he continued to struggle with the tangled fabric.

Betrayal. Pain. Searing rage in her heart, a flicker...*there it was.*

Her eyes flashed red, and she released the intensity of her fear and her anger. The duke was slammed against the opposite wall, and he crumpled, blinking, confused.

“A mage...?” He murmured as she rose to her feet, clutching the ruined top of her dress.

“Yes.” She hissed and kicked him hard across the face with the heel of her shoe. It left a bleeding gash, but he was unconscious. She stared at him for a long moment, every fiber of hate inside her urging her to kill him. But she wasn’t a murderer.

With an angry grunt, Grace pushed over the dinner table, sending the plates and glasses crashing to the floor. She grabbed the tablecloth and wrapped it around her shoulders like a shawl. Stepping over the motionless form of her attacker, she reached the door. Once outside it, Grace took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Then, she grabbed the knob and fused all the inner workings of the lock and latch. He was stuck in there.

Then she was running. There were *no* guards in the corridor, she’d barely noticed. Not the duke’s, and none for the palace. She rounded a corner and crashed into two on regular patrol, and she screamed as they tried to right her, so they quickly let go. They were guards who she had seen before, and the sudden shock on their faces told her just how bad she looked.

“One of you take me to the chancellor, *right now*. The other, guard the duke’s chambers and do not let him leave.” Her voice was low, still shaking but now with fury. Thankfully, neither asked any questions.

“This way.” Her guide nodded, and they walked fast. It was late enough that there were very few people milling about. No one to gawk, no one to whisper.

The guard led her to the Elder Council chamber, and though she dismissed him, he refused to go until given orders by a superior. With no desire to argue the point, she made her way to Abnur’s office, the light shone under the door, and she entered without knocking.

“You really must stop doing that...” He halted when he looked up. “*What* in Oblivion happened?” The quill dropped and he got to his feet, staring at her.

“Your friend, the duke...*happened.*” Tears spilled down her cheeks then; she couldn’t stop them. Her heart felt as if someone had reached into her chest and squeezed it in a fist.

“He raped you?” The question came out in a whisper.

“He tried.” Flames licked the surface of her clenched fists. “He knew about our *bargain* and said

he was expecting me to be a good sport and content to be *shared*.” Abnur stepped around the desk, his eyes unreadable. “My power was unreachable, I had *no defense*!”

“But he was not successful...”

“The fire came back before he could force his way in.”

“Where is he now?”

“Still there.” She glared.

“Dead?”

“No. I am more merciful than a *Tharn*.” The words came out like knives. “There is no dealing so important that I...” She shook her head. “I would never peddle the flesh of those who cared for me, even if...” Her entire being felt as if it was coming apart at the seams. “Even if I did not care for them.” How could he have promoted this and have felt any shred of *anything* for her?

“You think *I* had something to do with this?” He had the audacity to sound offended.

“I will be careful to never be so foolish again.” A scowl twisted across her mouth. “What did you tell him about me? That I pay for sex, so I must be willing to sleep with anyone?”

“Is that the sort of man you think I am?” Abnur took a step toward her, and she flinched violently, moving back. A strange expression came across his face.

“You want everyone to think that’s the sort of man you are. Day in and day out, you perpetuate that idea. *Tharn* will do anything and everything for the Empire and himself!” She was shouting at him and didn’t care who heard. “You wanted people to believe I was your plaything, did you not? Was that not the *bargain*?” He stared at her, coldness in his eyes. “I am not your playing. I am *nothing* of yours.”

Grayness

7th of Frostfall

“Hester, please go fetch Avise.” Grace’s voice was quiet as she lingered in the shadows by her bedroom door. Her lady’s maid knew something was very wrong, but bobbed a curtsy and quickly went without argument.

The lamps in the bedroom ignited as Grace entered, and sat on her bed, still clutching the tablecloth shawl. There simply was no will or energy to even change from the ruined dress. The enormity of what had almost happened loomed over her. On the walk between the Chancellor’s Office and her bedroom, she’d grown numb. She had to; the only other option was to let herself go to pieces. She was better than that, wasn’t she? *Stronger*. So she thought.

A *fool* is what she was. She’d allowed herself to *care* for *him*. The master manipulator, who had thrown her to the wolves, and for what? Part of her regretted not killing the duke. But he didn’t get what he wanted, not from her at least. Who knew how many others had fallen victim to that beast? Grace’s regret swelled. How many others had he attacked? How many others would he in the future because he still lived?

She rose and went to the mirror finally. One eye was blackened and swollen, the other side of her face was mottled with dark purple already. The skin felt hot and tight, enflamed from the assault, blood pooling beneath the surface. Something in her eyes didn’t quite look like herself, but she didn’t know what it was.

“Milady?” Came Avise’s tentative, worried voice from the sitting room.

“In here.” Grace braced herself for the gasps and was ready when both women were shocked by what they saw.

“What...happened?” Avise hurried over, and Hester wrung her hands. “Who did this? Surely not the chancellor...”

“No, he...he would never.” Would he? Somehow, she still believed he had at least that much decency. One would hope. With a deep breath, she calmed herself. “It was the Duke of Chorrol. He attacked me...but was ultimately unsuccessful.” Both stared at her speechless, mouths agape. There was little, she knew, that could be said in such a situation. There was certainly nothing that would be of any comfort. “I need you to fix my face. I’m going to move to my family’s house in the city.”

“But...why?” Avise shook her head.

“Because I cannot stay here.” Grace was not going to reveal her fears about Abnur’s potential involvement. She wouldn’t lodge that accusation to others without definitive evidence. When such proof surfaced, she would not hesitate. “I’m packing up what I have here tonight and will go first thing in the morning.”

“I’ll make sure all your things are ready to go, milady,” Hester told her. There was a pained expression on the maid’s face.

“I’d like you to come with me, Hester, if you aren’t opposed.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Grace watched her.

“Is that...even possible?”

“You’re employed by the chancellor as part of this household, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then, as he will do as he pleases, so shall I. So...if you wish to, I would like you to come with me.” Grace knew Abnur would not stop her, not if he had any sense. “Though it hasn’t been long, I’ve come to depend on you, not just for service, but your friendship as well.”

“Yes, of course.” Hester blinked back tears and fidgeted with her apron. “Of course I will come with you.”

Avisé reached out, then, and there was light from beneath her hands as they hovered over Grace’s battered face. She’d gotten away relatively unscathed physically, all things considered. It was her ability to trust that had been destroyed in the altercation. The tightness in her face slowly faded, replaced with comfortable warmth rather than the more intense heat of injury. That healing warmth didn’t reach inside her, though, where there was only emptiness and ice.

“Are you hurt anywhere else? Whatever happened, I can...”

“I’m not. It didn’t get that far.” She assured Avisé, who also had become a friend. Whatever pain was coursing through her now, could not be healed with magic. But she knew at least there were some good people still.

“Did you burn the bastard alive?” Hester asked in a whisper. Grace had never heard her curse before.

“I thought about it. I locked him in the room, though. Abnur may do as he sees fit.” She gingerly touched her face. It was like nothing had happened. “Thank you, Avisé.” Would he simply let the duke go? What of the guards who had seen her fleeing, beaten and afraid?

“What will the chancellor do to him?” Hester’s eyes grew large as she obviously was imagining whatever horrors she could.

“I don’t know.” Grace’s shoulders slumped. She didn’t want to talk about Abnur, not now. “I think, though, that I’m going to take a bath.” She let out a long breath and looked at Avisé. She was a lovely girl, even in her tousled state. Presently, there was anxiousness in her blue eyes. They hadn’t known each other long, but long enough that Avisé knew something was wrong beyond just the assault.

“I will get the bath started, milady.” Hester, glad to have a task, made for the bath chamber at once.

“I know that you’re not alright,” Avisé spoke very quietly. “But...please, don’t fall too far.”

The majority of Grace’s belongings were academic, so they would remain where they were, in her archives office. Everything else fit into one large trunk, which was spirited away. Hester had only a small bag, and in the morning, they walked on foot from the palace into the city. No one stopped

her, no one questioned her.

It seemed strange how the world outside went about its business like nothing had happened. How many other people were shaken so profoundly at that moment, the same as Grace was? How many felt like shells of themselves? Many lived lives far more difficult than she. Many who had endured far worse than what had *almost* happened to her. She felt guilty about her pain, about the wound no one could see, and how she carried it in its fresh, raw state.

It was difficult to imagine having to feel this way or worse while having none of the things she had. The thought of perhaps finding a way to ease the pain of others felt good. But thoughts were meaningless; intent meant nothing. It was hollow and self-serving until she acted.

Grace couldn't allow such a thing to have been in vain. It was but a glimpse of the horrors of the world. She would use it however she could to ease the suffering of others. Very few were as fortunate as she was, both in escaping and in material wealth. They might resent her for that, or spit in the face of her efforts; it had happened before. She knew, though, that people needed help, not pity.

"Milady?" Hester tugged Grace's sleeve, and she blinked, looking down at the diminutive woman. "You've been staring at a lamp post for several minutes. People are growing concerned."

"Hm?" She looked ahead, and indeed, she had been. Well, at least she hadn't walked straight into it. *This* time. "Ah. Let's continue."

Mrs. Basero, the housekeeper, greeted Grace at the door to the grand house, taking her cloak and shutting the door quickly to keep out the cold.

"All your things have been taken to your rooms, and they're being put away, Lady Tiradia." The graying woman smiled. "Who is this, then?"

"This is Hester, my lady's maid. I've brought her to join the household. If you could, please get her set up."

"Yes, of course. Is there anything you need presently?" Mrs. Basero eyed Hester, sizing her up. She was stern, but fair, not unlike Nalea, but a bit more of a mother hen.

"No, thank you." Grace turned to her maid. "When you're settled in, and Mrs. Basero has finished with you, I will be in my rooms."

"Yes, milady." Hester curtsied.

These were rooms Grace had slept in for her entire life. Every time Silero came to the Imperial City, he would take her along and find her new books and things to tinker with. People believed him to be such a doting father, though he was actually a doting grandfather. Over recent years, she'd had little cause to miss her family, but she found herself missing the familiarity of them being around. It didn't matter that her mother could be overbearing and hysterical; she was still *mother*.

Frantic knocking woke Grace. After locking her door, she'd dozed off. Sleep had been fitful at best the night before. There were notes of concern coming from the voice of Mrs. Basero on the other side. Something about guards. Grace sighed and got up, unlocking the door and opening it. The poor woman looked to be at her wit's end. Surely *Hester* was not so troublesome; most days, the

girl barely made a peep...

“*What* is going on?”

“There are two guards posted at our front door, milady. They say they’re to speak to no one but you, and they won’t leave or explain themselves!” Mrs. Basero huffed.

“*Fucking Tharn.*” Grace almost bared her teeth. Pushing past the housekeeper, she stomped downstairs then flung open the front door. “What is the meaning of this?” The two guards turned at once to face her. They were the ones she’d crashed into the night before as she fled the duke’s suite.

“My lady, we are ordered to attend you as personal guard.” The taller one told her, very officially. Both looked nervous, though were peering at her no-longer-bruised face.

“I’m the daughter of a Lord Governor, what the fuck do I need guards for?” She snapped.

“We...we follow orders...” The second offered. He was right, of course, it wasn’t their fault that they were told to do something. Her eyes narrowed at them anyhow.

“What, *precisely*, are these orders?”

“To ensure that whatever place of occupancy you take up is secure from threat or harm.” The shorter one was the one who had guided her back to Abnur’s office and refused to leave.

“And I suppose you’re required to report back about my comings and goings as well?” She folded her arms, noticing then the glances from those passing. Both guards frowned.

“No, milady. We were given no instruction beyond that order.”

“So, what? Your palace duty now is to *guard my house*?” Why, in the name of all things sacred and revered, would Abnur Tharn order guards into her service? A ball of ice then settled into the pit of her stomach, and Grace leaned forward. “What happened to the duke?” Her voice was hushed.

“We don’t know, milady.” The taller one glanced around them, then. That gave her pause as she eyed the two of them, assessing their ability. Her confidence to defend herself was severely impaired after what had happened.

“You’re just supposed to join my household then? Palace guards being *rented* out to me?” Was she expected to *pay* them too?

“Yes, milady.” The shorter one nodded. Getting their names would be helpful, rather than simply calling them tall and short. Both were taller than she was anyway. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Inside the door, both Mrs. Basero and Hester were watching with varying degrees of concern.

The shorter one was called Leo, and the taller one was Quint. They were assigned the front and back entrances of the residence, and there they stood, following their orders. Grace didn’t like the entourage of attendants that she was amassing. Life had seemed simpler when she could go on her own from place to place without such concerns. Once upon a time, she’d been able to creep around anonymously. None would give her even a second glance. Her association with Abnur had brought *that* to an end.

In the back of her mind, the possibility of the duke showing up was constantly prodding her. Fear was the one reason she allowed the guards. And damn Abnur for knowing her as he did! He knew she wouldn't send them away because he knew she was afraid. The act of sending those guards had poked holes in her assertion that he'd been involved with what the duke had violently sought. But she didn't even trust *herself* anymore. She *wanted* Abnur to be innocent of the accusation, of course, and she feared that because of that, she would consciously or subconsciously choose to see ways in which he was free of guilt. Even *if* he truly had no part in it, she didn't know if things could resume as they had been. The thought of being touched in any capacity by anyone made her skin crawl.

Nothing in her mind was linear anymore, it felt. It was chaos and pain.

To keep to her routine, Grace still went to the archives in the mornings and still worked on her transcriptions with Hereic and Avise. Things were quieter, and to her surprise, Hereic didn't bother her about it. Avise might have given him some reason for it, but she was grateful not to have anyone hounding her or asking her if she was alright every five minutes. She just needed peace. And time.

A shadow of the fear she'd felt seemed to follow her wherever she would go. Her routes were meticulously planned, and secondary routes in case the primary was compromised somehow. Always, she was looking over her shoulder, searching the faces of those who passed, anxiously passing dark alleys. Regardless of her efforts, her own skin didn't even feel as if it *was* her own skin. When looked upon even by passing strangers, it was as though they somehow knew, that the invisible wounds were apparent, and that they judged her for them. Sudden noises or abrupt movements startled her and more than once she had to quench the flames that instantly gathered in her hands. Was this what living was now? Guards or no guards, it didn't matter, she was afraid nevertheless.

Sundas morning, at the insistence of Mrs. Basero and Hester both, Grace delayed her morning departure and sat down for breakfast. Her appetite had been sparse in the four days since what happened, and apparently, it was worrying them. She felt perpetually tired, and hungry even, but the rich smell of eggs, cheese, and sausages was still too much. It appeared that there would be no *getting back to normal*. Whatever normal was. Once the hovering attendants had left her alone, she got up and headed for the staircase.

Passing the front entry, the bell rang, followed by a knock. For a long moment, Grace looked at the door and was going to disappear to her rooms. But it rang again. No one else was coming, and so with an irritated sigh, she opened the door.

There, on the stoop, looking as shocked as she felt by his appearance, was Abnur's valet, Decir.

Blood Ring

12th of Frostfall

So surprised were Grace and Decir to see one another, that they stared for a long, awkward moment. *Now* what was Abnur doing? Weren't the guards enough? This strange, magnanimous bullshit didn't suit him.

"Lady Tiradia...you answer your own door?" Decir blinked, still taken aback.

"Today, I do, apparently."

"I see, ah...I have a parcel to deliver." The lack of protocol had thrown the valet off, and he simply held out a small box wrapped in brown paper, tied with string.

"Thank you." She didn't need to ask from who, obviously.

"I bid you good day, madam." Decir bowed, turned on his heel, and strode down the street away from her stoop. Glancing over at Quint, who was on front-door-duty, she put the box into her pocket.

"You never saw him. Understand?"

"Saw who, Lady Tiradia?" He stared forward, and she stepped back inside, shutting the door.

"Oh! Milady!" Hester came barreling toward her from around the corner, wiping her hands with a cloth. "You answered the door?" She looked utterly bewildered by the very notion of it.

"Yes. I was walking by..." And now, Grace wanted Hester to go away and return to whatever she'd been working on. The small parcel was practically burning a hole in her pocket.

"You shouldn't have had to do that. Who...who was it?" Hester leaned to look out the window, pulling the curtain aside.

"I don't believe that it is any concern of yours who comes to my door." Grace frowned then. She was always sure to be fair and respectful to attendants and house staff but had never appreciated anyone prying into her business. The maid whirled around, looking horrified suddenly, her face flaming red.

"Oh, I...I do beg your pardon, milady, I did not mean to pry. I am concerned, is all. For your safety..." She fidgeted with her apron. "I am so sorry..."

"I believe you. Best you'd get back to your work." Grace turned toward the staircase.

"You didn't eat your breakfast, milady..."

"Nor will I. Off you go. Mrs. Basero always has work that needs doing." She started up the stairs without a backward glance.

"You don't need anything?" Hester came to the bottom of the steps, looking up.

"No. I don't. Thank you." The tone this time was curt enough that the message was received.

Grace didn't want to be coddled or hovered over. She wasn't some fragile thing in need of careful handling.

Finally, alone, with the door locked, she sat on the edge of her bed and carefully untied the string. Beneath the paper wrapping was a wooden box that fit easily in her hand. Had he sent her a *gift*? That was extremely uncharacteristic of him, and she grew suspicious before finally removing the lid and staring down at the contents.

A normal person would have recoiled in disgust and horror. Grace felt neither. Perhaps she was a bit surprised, but for a man like Abnur, this was no doubt one of the milder things he'd sent to anyone in a box. She was glad, however, that she'd opted not to eat her breakfast.

In the box, nestled on a small, stained, satin cushion, was a very abused, severed finger. Upon the detached digit was an ornate gold ring, crusted with blood. It bore the crest of Colovia, inlaid with the seal of Chorrol. It was safe to assume the duke was dead. Probably. Hopefully. Abnur did take enjoyment from the suffering of whoever he decided was the enemy. Perhaps not his best quality.

The message was clear enough: he'd had nothing to do with the attack. It was no small thing to end the life of such a high ranking noble, but if anyone were going to get away with it, it would be Abnur. Grace almost felt guilty about how *not* disgusted she was, coupled with a very deep and very dark sense of satisfaction. But she no longer needed to feel afraid, that was the important thing. Not that she was about to immediately feel comfortable with everything and everyone again. An incident, such as the one she endured, would not simply be undone with spilt blood.

Grace took the ring, disposing of the finger with a bit of fire, leaving the ash in her fireplace. With a quick rub, she got most of the blood off the ring before putting it in her pocket and pulling on a cloak. With any luck, she'd be able to leave the house without alerting either of the mother hens.

Like an errant adolescent, she crept down the staircase, grateful for the fact they were stone and not wood. It made sneaking much easier. She paused, listening, and heard only distant chattering coming down the central corridor from the kitchen area. Grace darted for the door, opening and closing it quickly. Quint stared at her, confusion on his face.

"Much like earlier, you saw nothing." She whispered.

"Of course." He smirked, though. "I didn't see anyone come out. Nor which direction they went. Perhaps, I was across the way, chatting with that shop girl."

"Brilliant. Go do that." She nodded. "Now." He didn't need to be told twice, and Grace made good her escape. Perhaps it was handy having Quint and Leo after all.

There were no council sessions scheduled on Sundas, and so most of the staff was absent from the usually-bustling offices. The door to Abnur's was open, and she heard something fall, followed by a string of expletives he didn't even use in *her* company. Grace took a deep breath and let it out slowly, reaching out to touch the door, but still hesitated.

"Just come *in* already." Abnur snapped, exasperated. She pushed open the door, finally stepping inside. He looked the same as ever, of course. Why she expected otherwise, she didn't know; it had only been just under a week since...things. "I wasn't expecting this visit for at least three more days." He sat back in his chair.

"I thought it merited immediate discussion. The message was fairly abrupt, don't you think?"

“It got the point across, obviously.” He almost smirked, and she reached into her pocket, pulled out the ring, and dropped it on his desk.

“You killed him.”

“I tortured him first.” Abnur picked up the ring, examining the engravings.

“Why?”

“If you don’t know, then there’s nothing to discuss after all.” He dropped it back on the desk, rubbing his fingers together to get rid of any remnants of dried blood.

“I prefer *not* to make suppositions.” Grace folded her arms. Likely they were each determined to be both unstoppable forces and immovable objects. He slammed his fist on the desk and surged to his feet. She almost flinched.

“Damn it, you made an accusation that I had *no choice* but to refute!” He was *angry*; she hadn’t expected that. But she scoffed.

“You killed a man just to clear your name?”

“I’ve done worse.”

“I don’t doubt it.” She knew for a fact that he’d been accused of far worse things throughout history. But *this* had made him angry? “You sent guards to my house. The only two that knew anything about what happened.”

“Yes. And fortunately, there weren’t any others. The matter was not difficult to tidily sweep beneath the rug.”

“He was the *Duke* of Chorrol, Abnur, not some nobody. People *will* notice that he came to the Imperial City and never returned. You think that won’t come back to you? Or worse, me, somehow.” She made a frustrated noise and went to the sidebar, pouring herself a glass of wine.

“Please, *help yourself*.” Abnur gave her a level look, and she made a rude gesture. “Aside from your abysmal opinion of me, what sort of a fool do you think I am? Almost no one knew he was here. Loose ends *other* than your guards, the *stolen* maid, and that damned assistant girl, have been tied up. Don’t make me regret trusting you to clean up *your* end of things.”

“My end of things?” Grace almost saw red, and she set the wine glass down before she could shatter it. “Because somehow, in some way, *any* of the responsibility for what happened is on *me*?!”

“Don’t twist my words, Grace, you know that isn’t what I was implying. Whatever you may think, I would not stoop so low as to place blame for another’s behavior on *you*.” His lips twisted in a sneer before he went and poured his own glass, draining it at once.

Abnur Tharn was not a man whose *feelings* could be hurt. He’d need to have some in the first place. But what she’d said to him the night of the attack obviously *had* bothered him.

“Why does it matter what I think?”

“You presume that what...”

“I *presume* nothing.” Grace picked her wine back up and drank. It was impossible for anyone to

truly know all the inner workings of that man, but she knew him well enough.

“What are you fishing for? Hm?” Abnur came toward her but stopped before getting close enough to make her nervous. “Are you looking for some heartfelt declaration of *sentiment*?” He said the word like it was an abomination.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Abnur. What do you take me for?”

“A *reasonable* person. Don’t prove me wrong.”

“Insufferable ass.” She muttered into her wine. “What’s the reason for all this, then? Abnur Tharn does not kill indiscriminately.” Her eyes remained on his as he watched her, safely behind his icy wall of indifference.

“That idiot deserved to suffer for the choice he made.”

“So you’re judge, jury, and executioner?”

“I fill those roles concurrently far more than you realize.”

“I have no doubt. But by doing that, you’ve practically erased that it ever happened. It was vengeance, not justice.” No one else would ever know what the duke had done.

“You’re sorry he’s dead?” Abnur stared in disbelief.

“Not even a little.” Grace shook her head, letting out a long breath. “But now, it’s been made into a secret. A mar on his name that will never show as it ought to.”

“Had he been here under *any* other circumstances, I’d have publicly dragged his name through the mud with great delight, I assure you.”

“What circumstances called for subverting judicial process? You were covering your ass, obviously. Not that I’m surprised.” Never in a million years would she have believed Abnur did anything that didn’t somehow serve himself. She assumed he was going to tell her to mind her own damned business, but he strode across the room and firmly closed the door. Secrets and intrigue? What was going on between him and Colovia? He’d always looked down on the people of that side of Cyrodiil.

“We met to discuss the eventuality of a change in the Empire’s leadership.” He stood closer now, but she wasn’t afraid of him. He wouldn’t touch her...probably ever again. Somewhere, disappointment faintly flickered.

“Revolution?” The word was barely audible when it passed her lips. Whatever she’d been expecting, it wasn’t this.

“He will cross a line at some point. It’s inevitable. I don’t know how or when, but when it happens, it is prudent to have *some* sort of contingency plan.” Everything about this conversation was treason, but Grace knew he was right. The Longhouse Dynasty was on its last legs; many, if not most, Imperials were tired of having foreigners lording over them. It was a point of contention dating back to the First Era when the Nedes were enslaved by the Ayleids. And then, not so long ago, Cyrodiil had been under the rule of the Akaviri Potentates.

“And you need to know who amongst the regional leadership is willing to act against the Reachmen.” She nodded, understanding. For the moment, she was gladly focused on politics as opposed to her own problems. “Was Duke Aquilarios uncooperative?”

“Not at all. He responded exactly as I’d hoped, but...” Abnur trailed off, gesturing vaguely at her. The duke’s inhumane execution *was* because of her. Again, a normal person would be disturbed, but it was almost touching. Abnur cleared his throat, though. “Hopefully, his son Varen will be of a similar mindset, but with less propensity for rape. It remains to be seen.” He was doing what he could to reestablish some semblance of trust, she could tell. Not that he’d ever admit to it. But, he was revealing information that could mean the fall of the Tharn family. She’d never heard of any house truly redeeming themselves after a treasonous fall. “Speaking of the licentious duke, I was able to extract a fair amount of useful information from him during our...talks.”

“What kind of information?”

“Mostly nothing pertinent to you. Though, I did learn that he was told by someone that you would be a willing participant in whatever he wanted.” Abnur wisely took a step back at once.

“*WHAT?!*” Her wineglass hit the floor, shattering. “Who, Abnur? *WHO TOLD HIM THAT?*”

“Lower your voice.” He hissed. “A female, that’s all he knew. He didn’t remember much about her, which made me curious if his mind had been manipulated somehow. More than likely, it was some wench hired or bullied into delivering the information.”

“But who...”

“I have the names of the palace guards who were posted in that wing that night. Also, I have his personal guards...detained.”

“Why was that not the *first* thing you told me?” Grace gestured to the glass fragments, which promptly reformed the wineglass. “And what do you mean, *detained?*”

“What do you think I mean? They’re chained to a wall in a dark place where I made sure they could hear their master screaming.” He shrugged.

“Truly, I have spent too much time with you. I should be horrified right now. Both because you killed the duke, *and* you have his guards imprisoned and subjected to psychological torture.”

“But, you’re not.” He did smirk then.

“You’re a terrible influence.”

“It’s a matter of perspective.” There was a pause as Abnur refilled her mended wineglass.

“I didn’t think I was anyone’s *enemy*. It seems unlikely that in the short span I was publicly seen with you, I could have become such a target.” Grace shook her head.

“It’s not impossible, I *am* highly sought after for marriage.”

“Oh, yes. What a prize you are.” She rolled her eyes. “It would seem foolish, though, to incur your wrath if they want to gain favor.”

“Perhaps, then, a *spurned* lover of yours?” His usual smug expression slithered onto his face, and she stepped up to him, peering into his eyes.

“Shockingly-few of my lovers did not require payment for their services.” She didn’t want to be touched, not yet, anyway. But, whatever dwelled in her by way of desire for him, it was not dead. Unfortunately. “As for spurned, the closest that comes is you.”

“I was not your lover.”

“Perhaps if you had been, we wouldn’t even be having this bloody discussion.”

“If I recall correctly, and I do, *you* left the door ajar.”

“I’m not sure this is the appropriate time to argue the details of who is to blame for your failure to...bring the matter to hand.”

“*I* thought it was well in hand.” Abnur Tharn was capable of anything but feigning innocence.

“*Abnur.*” She huffed. Grace folded her arms and moved away from him, but could feel his gaze burning into her back. He held too much sway over her, she knew that now. He did, too, probably. Which was part of the problem. “*Stop* trying to distract me.”

“Yes, yes.” He sighed theatrically. “Whatever the case, someone intended you harm.”

“Well, they got what they wanted then, didn’t they?” She sat down on one of the chairs near his desk. “I was beaten, threatened with rape. And now, at every sudden noise, my heart jumps up into my throat. Every shadow is someone who means to finish the job.”

“At least you can rest assured that Duke Aquilarios won’t be the one coming for you.” Abnur offered, pleased with himself. She gave him a dirty look.

“That does not help. Whoever sought to hurt me is *still* out there.”

“Had you not leapt to conclusions and run off to Silero’s house, you might be better protected here.” Protected by whom? *Him*? He wasn’t the protective type.

“I was *here* when it happened, so, obviously not.” Her eyes fixed on the ring, where it sat on the desk. “I want to speak with your detainees *before* you make them disappear, too.”

“You doubt my ability to extract information from the unwilling?” Abnur scoffed and rolled his eyes, but she got up again, moving toward the door.

“No, but as you weren’t the one attacked, the final decision isn’t yours, is it? Send word when I can speak with them.”

“Grace.” Something in the way he said her name made her freeze. It lacked mockery or sarcasm, and she wasn’t sure she could handle anything serious right then. She looked back at him, though, waiting for a remark about ensuring the door was shut, or some such thing. “You should have known better than to believe that Colovian dog.”

“I was *distraught*...”

“Do you think *I* would ever be capable of sharing?”

Contention

15th of Frostfall

The stones themselves of the undisclosed dungeon emanated the very essence of suffering. It mingled with the odor of waste and stagnant water. The flagstones were wet as tiny rivulets steadily trickled through the moldering walls. Strange fingers of moss seemed to claw through, gripping the rocks like skeletal hands, oddly visible in the low light. It was where Tharn did the dirtiest of his dirty work.

“Charming,” Grace muttered.

“Impressive; you haven’t gotten sick yet.” He made an amused sound.

“I have a stronger stomach than you might think.” She paused, hearing the frantic shuffling ahead. The sound was too big to be vermin, of which there was plenty.

“Last cell on the left.” He pointed, and she strode down the dark corridor, igniting a small fiery sphere in her palm that lit the way.

The air felt heavy; it was chilled and damp, thick with woe. It made sense that she wanted to speak with individuals who were partially to blame for what happened. Tharn wasn’t particularly inconvenienced by allowing her to extract the information herself. He was curious to see how she reacted to them. For as much time as they’d been down here, getting them to talk would likely be effortless.

The cell wasn’t locked; it didn’t need to be. Chained to the far wall, were the two guards, sitting in their own filth. They cowered and shielded their eyes from the light, which Grace set in the air to hover as the brightness intensified.

Silence stretched on, punctuated only by dripping water or shifting chains. He knew what training she’d had during her early years, back when she’d intended to become a battlemage. After all, he’d designed and implemented the curriculum. It wasn’t all about magic, as one might expect. Grace had excelled in the areas of psychological warfare. Decades ago, he’d watched her, only an adolescent then, reduce the instructor to tears as he pretended to be a detainee. She hadn’t even raised her voice.

There were shadows inside her that she’d quelled for more than thirty years. Tharn could *see* it; after all, he was well acquainted with such darkness. He wondered if any of what dwelled in her had been loosed since the duke’s fatal error. Tharn fancied that he knew her better than anyone else did. But there was much more than that which remained yet undiscovered.

On her face was fleeting reluctance, which was very interesting. It meant that whatever she had in mind would be well on par with having locked up the guards here to begin with. The thought of Grace engaging in Tharn-level depravity was titillating. Though also, concerning. Because of the way she *cared* in general, doing such things would stay with her. Silently, he berated himself, missing a time when the matter of what another person felt would have given him absolutely no pause.

It was frustrating and infuriating that anyone’s thoughts and feelings but his own mattered. But,

things were as they were, he'd allowed this to become...whatever it was. Guilt-ridden, self-loathing people were so dull. He'd already committed murder for her; if it preserved her more interesting, regret-free traits, then he'd do this, too.

Grace slowly approached the wretched captives.

"You probably don't remember me." She started. "There's no telling how many times your master had you keep watch while he did what he did. You're here for your complicity. You've had adequate time, I'm sure, to think on what a terrible mistake the duke made in underestimating the people he was dealing with."

When they tried to cower and hide their faces, Grace reached out, fanning out her fingers. The unseen force pinned them back against the wall and held their eyes open. The only visible evidence of her magic was faint embers that flickered in the air here and there. Everything she did was touched with fire.

"I've never been the victim of such violence before. Not personal, intentional, *intimate* violence. That's not to say I haven't torched my share of pirates and thieves. This was very different, I've never experienced genuine, paralyzing fear before." She paused as though coming to some realization. "It changes you. Some become *more* afraid. Others...react differently."

How changed was she? Changed enough that her bleeding heart for the less fortunate had ceased its flow? He hoped not, actually. Her concern for the people of the Empire and the desire to see them flourishing once more, was one of the things he admired about her. Maybe it would be enough for her to simply be present as *he*, instead, extracted whatever information they might have.

"Perhaps, I should..." Tharn started, but she put a hand up, halting him.

"No, Abnur." She shook her head, then addressed their prisoners again. "On my father's side, I am descended from a long line of individuals notorious for their cruelty and disregard for life or suffering." It was a strange thing to say. But even he might have felt a tad worried in their position. Tharn had never thought much about the Terrvos family of Morrowind, but they, not entirely unlike him, had never shied away from dirty work. But Grace interrupted the never-ending stream of his thoughts. "I've denied it for my whole life, that vile thing *so* ingrained in them. Always, I chose to help others and be as unlike them as possible. I never thought I would reach a point where I wanted to embrace that nature. I've never done anything to intentionally bring about suffering before. But...there is a first time for everything, is there not? And in this, my hand has been forced."

"Just kill us." One of them croaked.

"Who told you to leave your post that night?" Her voice was quiet but clear and concise.

"Please..." He rasped again, hoarse from lack of water.

"I will grant you nothing, speak, or suffer further." The fire rippled beneath her skin, and Tharn watched, fascinated to see beneath more layers of this woman.

"You're only going to kill us." The other whimpered.

"Death is far better than what will happen if you don't answer my questions." With a small gesture, the manacles on their wrists and ankles glowed red-hot, and they screamed. It was a sound that would have unnerved even the most hardened of individuals, but Grace didn't react. The heat quickly receded from the metal, though, and the captives stared at her, chest heaving. Fear of more

suffering was bright in their eyes.

Finally, one of them gave in. As Tharn assumed, it did not take much. After all, the person they would have been protecting with their silence was already dead.

“The duke said we were to remain outside, not to enter under any circumstances.” He panted. “It... it was someone else who said we should leave altogether and...take the night off.”

“*Who?*”

“Some girl.” The other decided to say his piece, as well. “I can’t...recall her face...”

“It’s a blur.” The first confirmed. “She gave us gold. She was...very convincing.” Their eyes seemed to glaze over a little as they tried to remember. It was a clear sign of manipulation.

“A magic wielder of some sort, then, who addled your brains. Not likely just a hired messenger, then. The responsible party spoke to you in the flesh.” Grace mused, then glanced back at Tharn. “You cannot trace it?”

“I suspect there was a compound on the gold, if it physically affected their ability to form memories for even a short time, there is nothing for me to retrieve. Unfortunately.” To avoid magical detection, it was ingenious. Annoying, but certainly imaginative. “It’s rather clever, really.”

“Not clever enough if they think they can elude us forever.” She snarled.

“Us?” Tharn arched a brow. Obviously, he intended to be present for the whole of this crusade she was embarking on, but that was the first inclusive thing she’d said about it.

“Were you planning to leave the investigating up to me alone?”

“Of course not.” He scoffed. “I can’t allow you to fumble about with no guidance. I’ve found my quarry with less to go on than this.” Her attention returned to the matter at hand.

“Well, this wasn’t quite as trying as I anticipated. Marinating for a few days in your own shit probably had something to do with that. Have you told me everything, or shall we come back in a few more days?” She tilted her head to one side, regarding them.

“A few more days and we’ll be dead anyway.” The one on the right hung his head, a sob escaping. These guards had never been trained for their duty; they broke as easily as spun glass dropped on brick.

“I would ensure you’d live through it.” It was a menacing promise.

“Just kill us already...no more of this...there is nothing else to tell!” The left guard rattled his chains. “We were in the tavern, and...” Apparently, there *was* more to tell.

“*Which* tavern?”

“The Golden Helm.” He panted. “Just before we went on duty.” Tharn knew the place, it wasn’t far from the brothel, so it was safe to assume Grace knew it, too.

“Is there anything else at all? Was anyone else with you?”

“No...there is nothing. Just let us die...”

She turned from them and walked toward Tharn, but passed him, and stepped back into the corridor. He glanced at the chained men, wallowing in their stench, then followed her.

“If you wish for them to meet a more humane end...”

“No.” She shook her head. “Well, yes. They must be dealt with, but they’ve suffered for several days here already.”

“What, then, do you suggest?” He could see her conflict.

“I suppose you aren’t opposed to daedric involvement?” The brief transparency on her face was gone, and in its place was a shadow of the mischief she usually wore.

“Did you forget who you’re talking to?” Tharn feigned offense, hiding his shock. “I could snap my fingers and fill that cell with daedra to devour them.”

“How is *that* humane?”

“Killjoy.” He pursed his lips. “I fail to see how *any* daedric dabbling could be merciful.”

“I have something in mind, since I owe someone a favor anyway.” Grace went back into the cell, and a blue sigil flashed briefly above them before both men were drenched in a stream of clean water. They cupped their hands and drank, grateful for the small mercy. She was not so broken after all, but Tharn wondered what exactly her involvement with the daedra was. She’d never so much as breathed a word about it before.

Against the wall to Grace’s left, a large, swirling circle of fire appeared. The center of it rippled, and through it stepped the voluptuous and burning form of a flame atronach.

“Yesss, mistress?” At once, the atronach eyed the men, looking from them to Grace and back again. “Is this an offering?” The fiery form drew up close to her then, caressing her face. Tharn stared, gaping, with wide eyes and bald-faced astonishment.

“A gift for you, Suraxa, yes,” Grace, apparently, was familiar with the daedric entity!

“And this one?” Suraxa darted to Tharn, peering closely at him. The heat of her fire radiated off her, and he clenched his teeth, not entirely comfortable being examined.

“No. That one is spoken for.” Grace smiled, and her eyes met his briefly, but he held his tongue. “*These* two only are for you, and you may do as you like with them.” Grace motioned to the captives, their irons opening and falling off. They watched in mute horror. Suraxa moved closer to the men and raised her hand a little, pulling them up to their feet as she inspected them.

“They are strong enough, I suppose.” She wasn’t extremely impressed.

“They’ll last longer if you give them water and sustenance.” Grace offered.

“Hm. Indeed. They require cleansing, as well. We will make do. I accept this boon. We will still come when called.” Effortlessly, the atronach tossed the prisoners through the portal. “For *whatever* you might need.” She then swept into a bow before slipping back through. The portal closed with a quiet sizzle.

“Well, well, well.” Tharn murmured, impressed. He wouldn’t have imagined Grace making any sort of bargain with such beings. “Summoning daedra...what *other* fascinating secrets do you have?” Grace turned to him, looking lighter, as though a burden had been lifted.

“It wouldn’t be much fun to reveal them all at once.” She shrugged. A small ache coursed through him, one he hadn’t felt since she’d been sitting on his desk with her skirt up around her waist.

“I’ve had little cause to interact with the flame atronachs, so I am interested. What do elemental daedra need with humans?” Curiosity mingled with his inconvenient desire. There was no denying the pleasure it brought him to see warmth in her gaze again. He’d felt her brief absence more profoundly than he’d yet admitted even to himself.

“Well, have you ever seen a *male* flame atronach?” She rested her hands on his chest, to his surprise, but he dared not touch her. He couldn’t, he *wouldn’t* without invitation. Not after what happened.

“No, actually...” They were in a filthy dungeon, it seemed appropriate in a very twisted way that she would torture him like this there.

“They must *breed*, somehow.” Her mouth was not far from his. His mind flitted from the memory of her open and ready for him in his chambers to what he imagined the flame atronachs would be doing with their new playthings.

“And what, precisely, did you condemn those guards to?” At his question, she withdrew, exiting the cell, giving him no choice but to follow like a pathetic puppy.

“Make no mistake, they *will* die. But, they’ve suffered enough, I think, so they will likely enjoy themselves before they do.”

He cleared his throat and shifted a little. Who else but this woman would sentence men to die from a *good time*?

“Right. Best we get back...” Without hesitation, he opened a portal.

Grace sat quietly on the sofa of Abnur’s study, a blanket around her shoulders as her teeth rattled. She’d left her soiled boots out by the entry. The permeating chill of the dungeon had seeped into her very bones, it felt, and even with the fireplace roaring, she couldn’t get warm. Nalea appeared, handing her a mug of something hot, which Grace accepted gratefully. The housekeeper departed, and Abnur idly swirled the wine in his glass. Either he was resistant to cold, or he’d acclimated to that deplorable place. At the moment, though, he had a distinct look of contemplation on his face.

“Are you *still* thinking about what those atronachs are going to do to the guards?” Grace sipped her tea, and Abnur gave her a sidelong look. She waited until he was taking a drink. “Perhaps you’d like to hear about *my* night with Suraxa.” As she intended, he choked on the wine and coughed, eyes watering.

“Very funny.” He complained. She grinned, genuinely, for the first time since everything.

“Well, you asked about my secrets.”

“I think that’s enough secrets for one day.” Abnur wiped his mouth with a cloth. He looked skeptical, though, and she had no intention of telling him anything else about it. Besides, it was *years* ago. And she hardly remembered...she was very drunk.

Abnur sighed, refilling his wine. To her astonishment, he then sat beside her on the small settee,

sipping. Her plan had been to put adequate space between them, literally and figuratively. But she just couldn't bloody stay away, could she? Her traitorous body had other ideas as the thrum of longing moved through her. She still wanted him, and somehow, some *fucked up* way, it felt stronger than before. Of course, they were inextricably connected now, thanks to this entire fiasco. No one else knew all the details or what had been done. No one else could be trusted, not until she knew who it was that sought to harm her.

"I hate that any of this has happened." She looked down at the cup in her hands, a wisp of steam rising from the hot contents. Peering at him out the side of her eye, she gauged his reaction. Despite everything, she felt badly for having accused him. "That night, I was terrified and disoriented. I was searching for any reason at all that made sense of the attack, even if it was painful."

"If the next words out of your mouth are an apology, I don't want to hear it." He frowned at her then, sitting forward a little. Was he *really* that angry still?

"Abnur..."

"Not by any stretch of the imagination should you apologize." It was one of those very rare moments of his, which was devoid of derision. "I am what I am; I don't blame you for fearing my involvement." He set his glass aside.

"You said it yourself, I should have known better..." Before he could get closer, she rose and stood in front of the fireplace, watching as the tongues of flame danced. Its heat felt wonderful. She shook her head, though, giving a quiet, mirthless laugh. "I *am* quite the fool, aren't I? I'm as ridiculous as I was when I was a doe-eyed girl hoping to impress you."

"You did impress me." He'd risen and was standing right behind her.

"Don't do that." She whirled on him. "Don't you *dare* start saying anything *nice*. It doesn't suit you, and it's insincere."

"I am a *pillar* of sincerity."

"That's a pillar of dog shi—"

"It *is* quite stupid, though, to allow anything subjective to influence your opinions." Abnur nodded before his lips curled into his smug smirk. "But, don't be so hard on yourself. You're not the first person to be attracted to *greatness*." Grace thought very seriously about slapping him.

"Let's not forget your humility and kind spirit. Truly, you are charity itself, Abnur."

"Indeed." He gave her a level look. "So, I'll have your belongings fetched back tomorrow. The maid you stole can get them ready. I'll even let you keep your guards."

"What?" She couldn't move backward without stepping into the fire, and while she was fairly flame-retardant, her clothes were not. Having them burned off would not help the situation.

"I meant it when I said I was responsible for you. Here, *in* the palace, eyes can be on you at all times. Your death would not be so easily erased, should your unknown enemy make a bolder move." He *almost* seemed menacing, standing as close as he was, peering down at her that way.

"Right, of course. And such a mar on your name would take what...maybe ten or twenty entire years to be forgotten as you continue to outlive everyone? No. You cannot force me back here." Grace almost stamped her foot. She didn't even have a good reason not to come back, except that he was making her.

"I can, and I will, and if you think I'm above having you locked in...*try me*."

"You son of a bitch." The words hissed between her teeth.

"You see? That's more like it." He smiled at her growing ire. "The world is righted once again."

"I'm *leaving*, Abnur."

"No, you're staying here tonight." Abnur seemed remarkably calm for a man very much in danger of immolation. Her jaw dropped in scandalized horror.

"You think that I'd still sleep with you after you've just told me you're going to hold me *prisoner*?" She spluttered.

"Listening never was your strong suit when enraged." He sighed. "Certainly, if the offer were there, I'd be hard-pressed to turn you down, but I'm familiar with that particular glint in your eye, and I prefer having my manhood attached to my body."

"So, twice in one month, I've been lured into a trap by a man." Grace bared her teeth, and anger flashed in Abnur's eyes. When she tried to push past him, he took her by the shoulders. She gasped, her heart suddenly pounding as a surge of *that* terror gripped her. He realized his mistake immediately, regret briefly in his eyes as he let go and stepped back. It didn't matter that she *knew* he hadn't meant to frighten her or that she *knew* he would not harm or coerce her into anything.

"Be furious if you must, it makes no difference to me. I will not risk the state of things in Nibenay, which we both know would be upset, should Silero find reason to blame *me* for your death." There was a vein at the side of his head that was sticking out; Grace had only ever seen it two other times.

"Yes, I suppose it would be *quite* the inconvenience for you if something happened to me."

"Perhaps you should simply be grateful for my efforts to *preserve* your life."

"Oh, and *how* shall I show my gratitude, Lord Tharn? On my back? Or perhaps, bent over your desk so you can get back to work more quickly? Because I cannot, for the life of me, think of what other *possible* benefit there is for you. I have nothing else to offer you, so that must be what you expect." She was shaking with anger. Never in her life had anyone sought to take her freedom from her. His initial ploy of having her as mistress-in-name-only was not so important. Being hounded for marriage was barely a minor inconvenience for him.

"I didn't realize how *little* you thought of yourself."

"No, *Abnur*, it's a reflection of how little I believe *you* think of me." She spat. "You think I cannot defend myself; that I can't protect myself. I am not some defenseless creature to be caged up and shut away!" He drew up close to her again, careful not to make contact. His stare was as icy as the color of his eyes.

"Believe what you wish, since you will not hear reason or the truth. When we've gotten to the bottom of things, you will be free to do as you wish. Until then, when you move about the palace or city, you will have your guards, and you will return here each night. If you don't, guards will be dispatched to retrieve you."

"And what if I see fit to visit my preferred local establishment? Usually, I stay the whole night. Though expensive, I have *quite* the appetite. Will you break down the door to drag me back?" Grace glared up at Abnur, daring him to try barring her from *that*, too. It was a nasty thing to say,

but she was furious.

“It’s my understanding that your favorite Altmer will work all hours. I suppose, then, you’ll just have to go during the day.” He turned away, snatching up the wine glass, and draining it.

“Interesting.” She scoffed.

“What?” He snapped.

“Why the fuck do you care who my favorite is?”

Dynamo Core

20th of Frostfall

The miniature, brass, clockwork spider made its way around the top of the worktable. There was a white cloth put down to enhance visual contrast, and the edges of the table were blocked so it couldn't fall to the floor. It moved along and came to a small, metal component, then halted. It seemed like an eternity before its little claw moved, clasped the item then raised its arm and deposited it into the small receptacle on its back, before resuming its progress once more.

"YES!" Grace let out a relieved breath, and Hereic couldn't tear his eyes away from it as the process repeated.

"How...*how* did you do it?"

"Well, everything is a decision. Checking conditions and then behaving based on if the condition is true or not."

"Choosing yes or no." He stood up straight.

"Exactly. A binary selection; all the instructions are basically such decisions. If condition A is met, do action one. If condition B is met, do action two, and so on and so forth. It can get very complicated, though." She chewed her lip, mentally going over the process again. She needed a way to streamline it. "Getting it to work mechanically was not much of a challenge since the mechanisms already existed; I merely found a way to give it instructions." She beamed, proud of the accomplishment, even if it was a small thing.

"But how?"

"I made it very simple, mostly because I wanted to see if it would work. The crystal inside this eye area..." Grace picked up the spider, and its legs flailed frantically, but she pointed carefully to a part of its head region. "There is a crystal in there that acts as an observer. When something that is not flat and white, such as the nuts and bolts, comes into view, it signals a set of instructions. Getting it to *grab* was a bit of a pain, but I managed it." Putting it down again, the spider's march resumed.

"I've never seen anything like it. Anything this small, anyway. I mean...extrapolating from something so minuscule and simple, it boggles the mind to think about what sort of work went into the Dwemer constructs that tried to kill us." Hereic crouched down so that his eyes were level with the tabletop, watching the tiny automaton moving about.

The office door opened with no knock and in walked a very unwelcome guest. Grace shot Abnur what should have been a deadly glare.

"How is it powered?" Her assistant's eyes grew wide as the clockwork creature picked up another little screw and dropped it into its receptacle.

"Tension springs for movement and a very tiny shard of empowered gemstone for the observer. I wanted to construct a little dynamo core for it, but that would require Abnur's assistance, and presently, I'd rather put something sharp in his soft parts. So that'll be a project for another time." She gave a shrug, and Hereic blanched, quickly standing upright and looking from her to Abnur,

who hadn't reacted.

"Ah, so you *won't* be angry forever. Interesting." He folded his hands behind his back, and Grace almost bared her teeth.

"You underestimate my ability to hold a grudge, you fucking snake." She pointed at him with one of the sharper tools from her workbench. It had been more than four days since her *imprisonment* under Abnur's watchful eye, and this was the first they'd even spoken. He'd wisely been staying well away from her.

"I'm leaving *before* the bloody room starts on fire," Hereic muttered, sullenly, then stomped to the door and slammed it on his way out. He disliked interruptions as much as Grace did, and they had been on a roll.

"What do you want, Abnur?" She grabbed the spider and disengaged its tension spring before he could get much closer to look at the project.

"For you to see reason, mostly."

"You want me to see *your* reason." She folded her arms.

"Obviously, since it's correct."

"I'm not sure what you expect, considering nothing you do makes any sense at all whatsoever. You, the most pragmatic, logic-bound, arrogant, and *selfish* man that I know..."

"Flatterer," Abnur smirked, and she made a frustrated noise.

"It's *not* a compliment!" Grace ran her fingers through her hair. She'd sufficiently distracted herself the last several days with the spider project, but even seeing him got her agitated again. "You've been doing things that ultimately serve *no* real purpose since...the day you invited me!"

"I've explained myself enough to you." Boldly, he took the spider from her, examining it closely. "Intricate work, though; impressive. When your urge to kill recedes, there are a lot of interesting things we might do with this."

The bastard was close enough that she caught the faint scent of whatever he used for soap, and even the barest trace of it took her back to the memories of their closest encounters. *Much* to her annoyance. She liked things better when she *didn't* want to throttle him. She was tired of feeling angry, but there would always be something he said or did that would irritate her. But, hadn't that been true for decades? He'd been taking great enjoyment in infuriating her for as long as she could remember...*and she enjoyed it*. The realization struck her like a blow to the gut. She took some sick pleasure from the debates and arguing. Clearly, so did he.

They'd been at *this*, whatever *this* was, for a month. It felt like the longest and shortest month of Grace's entire life somehow. She'd allowed herself to admit to physical attraction and lust, and little else. Anything else was dangerous, but she was getting to the point where there was little option but to acknowledge it.

No! This was *not* the time to be backsliding because of her unruly urges. Abnur had begun rummaging through her various containers of components, pulling her from her thoughts.

"What are you doing?" Grace went to his side. It didn't matter to him, of course, that these were *her* things, not his.

"I've got an idea." He murmured, holding up a tiny glass cylinder. Unfortunately, she was easily distracted by scientific endeavors, and without a second thought, she set aside the interpersonal dilemmas and introspection.

"For a dynamo core?" At once, she opened another drawer and fished for fittings that would hold the tiny cylinder. Her pulse increased. Yes! She'd been trying to put together a sustainable power core for *years* with little luck. That was why she needed *his* help. "Here." She dropped the fittings into his hand, and he gave a nod of approval. "I have a fairly extensive supply of distillations, reductions, infusions, *and* pure concentrations. Though also there are vials of water I blatantly stole from a few sacred wells with interesting attributes." She went to the table against the far wall with its cupboard and opened both doors, revealing her innumerable supplies. "I think I might be cursed in at least three different cultures." There were no large quantities, of course, since this was the travel-size supply. But in this instance, they only needed a little bit for so tiny a device. "I've documented all of the alchemical properties of everything in here."

"I knew there was a reason I liked you." Abnur murmured, focused on snatching up a few of the tiny glass bottles. Grace stared at him, taken aback by the offhand statement, which had obviously slipped out unconsciously. Right? He glanced at her, though, and frowned. "Don't just stand there, fit the contraption for the core!" She cleared her throat.

"Right, of course." *Bloody prick.*

In a matter of moments, the spider was open, and its coil components disassembled. She reconfigured the gears so that inserting the core would transfer the energy needed for the device to move. Perfect! But she paused. They needed a way to shut it down other than removing the core. Depending on how delicate or volatile it was, repeated removal might cause damage to the cell or to the spider.

"I think I've got it." There was eagerness in Abnur's voice.

"What did you put in it?" Grace was back at his side as he clamped the fittings onto the tiny core, the contents of which glowed a faint green. "The reactivity of the compounds..." He gestured to three bottles, and her mouth dropped open. "How did you combine those *without* blowing your hands off?!" The mixtures in question were ones that she wouldn't even *store* near each other for fear of the reactions between them. He leaned quite close.

"Nimble fingers." The look in his eyes as he peered down at her was startling, very nearly derailing her focus altogether. "Is the spider done?" The 'spell' was broken.

"Yes, I think so." Her mind set firmly on the project once more.

"Secure cradle for the core?"

"Yes."

"What about a lever for power?"

"Also, yes."

"Ah, well done." He looked unexpectedly pleased and went to where the currently inert spider lay, waiting for its core. Grace checked that the lever was disengaged, and Abnur tried fitting it in. "Hm. Your fingers are much smaller than mine, put it in with the node pointed toward the head." She took the core, very carefully nudging it into the slot. Abnur's hand rested on the small of her back as he pressed close against her side, observing her progress, and she hesitated for the briefest

second before firmly ignoring him *and* his damned hand. The minuscule power cell was a rudimentary creation at best, but it could be refined. Once it was in, she reassembled the spider and set it upright.

“Here goes.” Grace flipped the lever, and for a small eternity, nothing happened, but then it twitched a little. “Is it...”

“Just wait.” Abnur’s hand slid up her back. Sure enough, the spider’s legs began to move. “See?” The hand migrated back to her waist, giving a light squeeze. “Excellent...”

“It...it’s getting faster.” The spider started to move at more of a scurry than a walk, which resulted in stopping too late after coming across a bolt and the tiny claw grasping at nothing before it continued.

“I suppose the energy level produced by the core exceeds that of your tension spring. Elaborating its gear system and adding a throttle will help.” He offered. Riding the high of favorable results in their little experiment, Grace’s indignation seemed to have at least temporarily retreated, and gently, she leaned back against Abnur. Now both of his hands rested on her waist, but they remained immobile for a long moment. He bent, inhaling the scent of her hair. Even something as innocuous as that sent a shiver through her. *Oh, no...*

“It seems the next step will be sorting out a tiny gearbox, then.” Her scant resistance to his physical touch was depleting at an alarming rate. When his lips brushed against her neck, it was gone. “And...and a throttle mechanism...”

Better sense was overridden entirely, and she didn’t care, relaxing the rest of the way against him. He kissed her again on her jawline, and without hesitation, she looked up over her shoulder, pressing her mouth to his. The ever-present desire she harbored ignited as his tongue slid past her lips, his arms wrapping around her. But Grace pulled back suddenly, a little breathless.

“If you think for even *one* minute that this means I’ve forgiven you...”

“I don’t.” He smiled, though, kissing her again.

Abnur’s hands roamed across her middle, one making its way up and over her breast, stroking, massaging, sending burning veins of pleasure to the deepest parts of her. It wasn’t enough yet, and she found his other hand with her own as it splayed over her belly. Her fingers slid between his as she moved them both downward.

“What do you want, Grace?” He murmured against her ear, and she pressed his hand between her legs. Even through the layers of fabric, the contact burned exquisitely. “Tell me.” His hand had stopped moving, regardless of how she squirmed.

“Touch me.” She inhaled sharply as his fingers pressed up against her. His other hand tugged at the small tie at the neck of her bodice, and it loosened.

“On one hand, it is very tempting to be cruel and just leave you here like this, thereby forcing you to come to me for what you want.”

“You fucking *would*, wouldn’t you?” She breathed, squeezing his hand between her thighs.

“But, on the other hand,” He rubbed his middle finger against her, and she let out a shuddering breath. He nudged her feet wider with his boot for better access. “...I’m enjoying this.” She could feel exactly how much he was enjoying it pressing hard against her backside. Abnur began tugging up the front of her skirt with one hand, and she eagerly assisted, groaning as skin met skin. His

fingers traced her, exploring, stroking. She gave a startled yelp when he gently tugged the hair there and felt him smile against her ear.

Grace was gripping his arms, holding on as if he was all that was keeping her on her feet. She didn't want to be on her feet; she wanted to be on her back, or her knees, or bent over something, it didn't matter...at that moment, she didn't fucking care, she just *needed* him.

"Abnur..."

"As delightful as it would be to hear you beg, don't." He took her earlobe between his teeth, and her eyes closed. Why would he say that? If she begged, would he be unable to resist? The idea of him losing his precious control was delicious.

Did he plan this?

Why was he even there?

Shut up!

Abnur's fingers found her, moving in tiny, magnificent circles, and her breath caught. His other hand opened the top of her dress, freeing her breasts, and his fingertips played over her nipples. He pinched one and made a pleased sound at the squeak of surprise she gave. Grace reached back, her arm around his neck, gripping a fistful of his hair. He buried his face against her neck, holding her tighter against him. Her body strained for release, and her breath came faster.

"Loathe as I am to neglect any part of you, I need both hands to do this properly." He maintained his circling ministrations while he slid the index and middle fingers of his other hand into her mouth momentarily. She sucked, wetting them, knowing where they were going. When she released them, he reached down and slipped the middle inside her. She gripped his forearms, head back, eyes closed.

"Abnur..." She whimpered again, but he kissed her mouth to silence her. One finger became two as she edged closer to what she needed, squeezing around him.

"That will feel lovely, I imagine, when it's not my *fingers* inside you." That promise alone nearly undid her. His breath was hot against her ear, then she felt his lips and tongue on her neck again. She moaned aloud, her legs beginning to shake as he worked her with far more skill than she could have expected.

"Why not find out right now?" She panted, *hoping*.

"No." His soft laugh sent chills through her. "Not today." *Why?* What was he trying to accomplish? Her complete and utter submission? At this rate, he would undoubtedly have it. *Did* he want her to beg for it? Her sex-addled mind was wholly unreliable and would do anything for pleasure. If he wanted her to say yes to anything, now would be the time.

She was getting closer, his rhythm steady, urging her along as the pressure was still mounting, the dam slowly cracking as it became too much.

"How long have you wanted this?" He whispered.

"As long as I can remember." Her mouth didn't consult her brain, but her brain was in no condition to act as a filter at that moment.

"Good." He sounded genuinely pleased. "Me, too." The tension snapped, and she grabbed the edge

of the table with both hands as the spasm wracked her body. She cried out, hips moving against his hands as he pressed hard from behind, too. It was relentless and stretched on until it felt as if there was nothing of her left. It was wonderful, exquisite release...intoxicating.

As the sensation trickled away, Grace's legs seemed to have turned to jelly, and she slumped, but Abnur held her upright, his arms around her middle, his face still buried in her hair. They both were breathing hard, and it took a moment before coherent, linear thought resumed.

"It doesn't seem very fair that you took no enjoyment." Her voice was hushed, and she held onto his arms. By the gods, she loathed and despised feeling...*feelings*.

"I did enjoy it." Why was he holding onto her like that? Her skirt fell back in place, and the strength to stand was returning. Slowly, she turned, and his grip loosened. Aside from his hair looking as if he'd been walking in a windstorm, he wore a neutral expression. It wasn't a scowl, at least. He reached up, smoothing back his hair, and she noticed the wet stain near his thighs on the front of his tunic.

"Oh," So, he *had* enjoyed it. Grace felt a twinge of disappointment, though, she wanted to see his face and watch as he took his pleasure. She hadn't even been able to tell, this time.

Abnur calmly laced up the front of her dress, neatly tying it again as she stared dumbly at him. Her brain seemed sluggish to get back on track.

"Is this why you came down here? To be annoying, dazzle me with alchemy, and then obliterate the shredded vestiges of my self-control?" Oh good, language skills had resumed, and she gave a small, mischievous smile.

"No, actually. But that was a welcome surprise." He gave her the smug look he knew bothered her so much. "I came to tell you that tonight we're to meet with the palace guards who left their posts that night." Every bit of her annoyance and frustration came hurtling back to her.

"*Why* is it that you can never just tell me the important thing the moment you step into a room instead of distracting me and arguing and..."

"It's more fun to wait. Obviously." Abnur arched one brow at her, and Grace just shook her head.

"You are unbelievable, Abnur. I don't know what in the bloody fuck I'm—" The tirade was interrupted when he kissed her. Of course, her body betrayed her immediately by responding and reciprocating. There was a disconcerting disconnect between her fury and her desire.

Avise chose that moment to stride into the office, freezing where she stood, witnessing the unexpected embrace. Abnur didn't rush or pull back at the intrusion, but concluded languidly and gave Grace a diabolical smile, leaning close to whisper so only she could hear.

"At least now, I have a guaranteed way to get you to cease your squawking." His head tilted slightly to one side, amusement alight in his eyes as she gaped at him. He surprised her further when he pressed his mouth to her ear. "Next time, I'm going to lay you out on a table, sit down with your legs over my shoulders, and feast until I've had my fill of you." *Next time!* Grace couldn't even move and simply stared in complete disbelief, her eyes huge and round. She'd *never* heard him talk that way before. Not that it was a bad thing, but it was a shock, nevertheless. He moved toward the door, but paused. "Tonight, at eight, wear something plain. We're going alone."

Seedy Warehouse

20th of Frostfall – cont.

“So.” Avise cleared her throat. “Any earlier and I, ah...”

“Yeah.” Grace gave her skirt a firm tug and fiddled with the lacing tie at her neckline. Abnur had missed one of the eyelets in his haste. “I wouldn’t wish for that particular image to be burned in anyone’s mind.”

“You aren’t angry with him anymore, then?” Avise came toward the worktable where the clockwork spider skittered tirelessly, bumping into the raised edges that kept it safe from falling.

“I’m exactly the same amount of angry with him.” Grace scowled a little. “He’s lucky I’m not even angrier. Bloody bastard...” She huffed at the infernal bodice lacing, then turned her back, quickly undoing it then re-lacing the top correctly. “Hereic should be back before long. He *was* here, but his natural reaction to Abnur’s presence is to flee, so...”

“Is that a tiny dynamo core?” Avise picked up the spider, finding the lever at once and disengaging it. The legs ceased flailing, and she held it close to her face.

“Yes. I was berating Abnur, but then he diverted me with his considerable alchemical abilities by putting that together. And then...distracted me further with...charm.” Grace folded her arms, rolling her eyes.

“I can’t think of any time I’ve heard any woman refer to a cock as any sort of *charming*.” Avise gave a snort.

“Well, no, I didn’t mean...I wasn’t implying...*that’s* not what happened.” Except it kind of was... What in Oblivion was wrong with her? Grace was still out of sorts from the unexpected romp, spluttering and blushing crimson like some shy young girl who’d never been kissed before.

Avise paused, setting the spider down then put her hands on her hips.

“Why are you behaving so strangely?”

“I am not.”

“You *are*. Why should you be so bothered about using your own office however you see fit? You’re his mistress...or whatever, aren’t you?” The younger woman narrowed her eyes.

“I’m not *bothered* about...”

“I might be young, but I wasn’t born yesterday.” Avise grinned.

“Twenty isn’t that young.” Grace needed to get a grip, but she could see the wheels turning in Avise’s head. The girl was too smart for her own good, and it didn’t take much for her to work out the truth of things.

“So he’s letting everyone think you’ve been sharing his bed for *years*...and you never *actually* have, have you?” Her grinned widened.

“Why does it matter?” Grace grabbed the spider, examining its underside.

“Well, it’s interesting. Because it means the two of you *like* each other.” Avise came closer, peering at Grace’s face and the deepening color of her cheeks. “Like *courting* adolescents. It’s kind of adorable, if you think about it.”

“You shouldn’t think about it. There’s *nothing* adorable about...*why* are you badgering me about this?” Flustered was not a common state for Grace, which no doubt was the reason behind Avise’s amusement.

“I don’t know, it’s nice seeing you being a *person* instead of just a scholar.” She shrugged, still smiling, though. “With your hair all a mess and kiss-swollen lips. You should see yourself; your chin is so red from his little beard.” Grace automatically reached up, self-consciously, to touch the aforementioned areas. Her chin did feel a little raw. *Bastard!*

“How was your first week with the Healer’s Guild?” It was an almost desperate topic swap, but the last thing she wanted to discuss was any facet of her intimate anything.

“It was wonderful and exhausting and by far not *nearly* as interesting as what’s going on with you.” Avise nudged her with her elbow. Damn it. “Come on, it’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I suppose so.” She muttered and set the spider down, cheeks burning.

“You haven’t talked about it? With anyone?”

“Just *him*.” Grace let out a sigh.

“The chancellor...*that* chancellor...*talks* about it?” Avise laughed in disbelief.

“It’s not *heartfelt* discussion, if that’s what you mean. Abnur wouldn’t know heartfelt if it leapt up and bit him in the ass.” The room felt much too warm, and Grace squirmed internally. Her mind was being pulled in more directions than she was capable of coping with. Between Abnur, the guards, Avise, and *feelings*...she had no idea what to think, do, or feel. Where had her simple, carefree life gone so suddenly?

“What about your friends?”

“Friends? *What* friends? The only friend-like people I have in my life are you and Hester. Though, lately, all she does is fret about my safety. And I can only take so much of *that*.”

“I *am* your friend.” Avise nudged her again. “You’ve done so much for me...”

“I haven’t, actually.” Despite knowing that she shouldn’t unveil this particular truth, Grace wasn’t comfortable taking the credit for making Avise’s dream of becoming a healer come true. She also didn’t want her to feel in any way obligated to pursue friendship.

“What do you mean? The guild...”

“It wasn’t me.” Grace started cleaning up the components and bottles strewn about on the worktables.

“Then, who?” Avise frowned, confused, but then her brows shot upward. “*No*...but, why? He doesn’t even know my *name*!”

“Because of what you did in Rkundzelt.” It was one of the things Grace had kept herself from

thinking about too much, lest she start believing there was some deeper meaning to Abnur's aberrant charitable gesture. "Just...go on pretending you thought it was me. He will never admit to it, anyway."

"This is more serious than I thought. Divines help anyone who might foolish enough to try to hurt y—" Avise's expression fell abruptly as Grace's damnable glass face obviously gave something away. "That duke, he...what happened with...?"

"Some things are better left alone."

"He's dead, isn't he?" Avise lowered her voice to a whisper, but she shook her head. "What am I saying? Of course he is."

"The duke will never hurt anyone else again. That's all that matters."

"He did it for you..."

"*Don't* glorify something horrific."

"No, not at all, I just..."

"I appreciate your concern and your interest in...things. But I don't want you feeling like you *have* to be so friendly with me."

"Look, I'm your friend regardless of who sent me to the guild. In the last couple of weeks, you've gone through the wringer...and I didn't know you didn't have anyone to talk to."

"What's there to talk about?" Grace's throat felt tight as she shoved down the feelings threatening to rise, which made her even more frustrated, being so out of control of her own emotions. What a bloody fucking day this was turning out to be. She went to her desk, unnecessarily rearranging the items and papers piled on it. Avise followed, though, putting a hand on her arm.

"Have you always been alone?" The question carried far more weight to it than Grace could have anticipated, and she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "That came out wrong, I mean..."

"I've done most things on my own, yes, which has never been a problem. I have my family, of course; they support my academic endeavors..."

"I bet they don't care much for your involvement with Chancellor Tharn," Avise smirked suddenly, and Grace smiled, glad for a little levity out of the heavy subject matter.

"My mother's absolutely lost her mind about it."

"Because they don't realize he cares for you."

"That's a dangerous assumption to make." There was a strange clench in Grace's gut at the thought of it, though. No one would believe Abnur cared for anyone or anything but himself. Even *she* had difficulty giving so much as a shred of credence to the idea.

"Pretty hard *not* to make it, all things considered, don't you think?" Avise appeared to genuinely care. There was a loud knock then, on the door. Grace silently thanked whatever powers that might be for the well-timed interruption.

"*Is it safe to come in yet?*" Came Hereic's muffled voice.

"Yes." Grace rolled her eyes, and he entered, looking cautiously around, even behind the door.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe.”

“Where did you put his body?” He joked. Avise snorted then clapped her hand over her mouth as Grace gave her a pointed look. *Shut. Up.*

“Alas, he still lives. But look at the spider, it’s got a dynamo core, now.” She went to the worktable and picked it up, flipping the switch on and off again. “Well, a makeshift one.”

“*What?*” Hereic took the mechanical creature from her at once. “There are so many questions, though. I would have liked to be present when it was put together...”

“I doubt it.” Grace cleared her throat, and Hereic paused for only a second before opting not to ask why.

The dimly lit warehouse was located near the docks just outside the city walls. It was one of the locations for goods storage that Abnur’s *definitely* legitimate shipping business used. It would have taken the efforts of at least five lawyers to trace the elaborate paper trail back to him. It appeared to be a relatively small operation, though, one which a man of his means wouldn’t need.

“Isn’t it a bit over-dramatic having them brought to your ill-lit criminal enterprise at the unsavory end of the docks?” Grace hopped up to sit on one of the large crates, tugging on the cloak she wore over her leathers. Abnur, too, was dressed in plain, nondescript garb. A belted tunic wouldn’t really be suitable for as cold as it was.

“It’s practicality, not theatrics.” He folded his arms. They’d arrived earlier than intended and now had to wait. Apparently, whoever had been hired to procure these guards was a stickler for exact punctuality. It seemed odd for a henchman, but she wasn’t going to question it.

“Practical in case of torture and dismemberment, you mean.” She offered. His reply was a sidelong look. “That’s what I thought.”

“Believe me, it’s a much bigger hassle getting a body out of the palace than out of here.” He tapped his foot on a hatch on the floor, which she hadn’t noticed initially.

“Unfortunately, I do believe you.” An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. Patience was not one of Grace’s already limited virtues, though. “How long do we have to wait?”

“Almost an hour. I had anticipated there being more obstacles along the way.”

“How *convenient*.” She narrowed her eyes.

“Please. I’ve got more on my mind than whatever *you’re* thinking.” He shot her an impassive look then grabbed a worn-looking book off a slot on the wall, flipping through casually, affecting his typical air of apathy.

“Mmhm.” Grace picked at the edge of the crate a little. “I’m afraid they’re going to be able to tell us little more, if anything, than the other guards did. If the person orchestrating everything was careful enough that the duke’s guards couldn’t remember, I hardly think it will be any different for these ones.”

“You’re probably right, nevertheless we have to question them. It serves more purposes than simply acquiring information.”

“I suppose.” She looked up, pondering for a moment. “If whoever is responsible is keeping an eye

on them, they'll know we're asking questions."

"Depending on their diligence, it could be good or bad. Good if it makes them nervous so that they start making errors, bad if it makes them more careful." Abnur put the book back and leaned on the crate beside where Grace was sitting, arms folded as he stroked the hair on his chin.

"It's tiresome and frustrating." She sighed. "I've lived quietly for a reason. If I'm going to be afraid, I want it to be because something is trying to eat me while exploring a cave, not because some person wants to cause me harm."

"Whoever they are, they *aren't* going to harm you." He turned toward her. "Again, anyway." He meant it, but she wasn't so foolish to believe he could shield her from *every* possible threat.

"Oh, that's sweet." She smiled, batting her eyes a little. "Look at you, trying to be reassuring." Grace patted his cheek, trying to keep a straight face, but he shrugged, a familiar glint in his eye. How *quickly* his mood shifted.

"Whatever gets you on your back." Abnur pushed her knees apart, wedging his hips between them as she gasped in mock offense, unable to stifle the laugh that went with it, though.

"Joke's on you, I like you better mean." She gave a little tug on his beard, and Abnur swatted her hand. He pushed her legs farther apart, kissing her roughly, but she bit his lip enough to surprise him. "Keep dreaming, chancellor. It's fucking *cold* in here." Her better sense would win this one without a doubt. She *hated* the cold.

"That mouth. How has anyone been fooled into thinking you're respectable nobility?"

"That's assuming anyone ever thought I was." The frigid air helped keep her focus intact. "Did you not *just* say that you had more on your mind than this?"

"I didn't say this *wasn't* on my mind."

"Abnur Tharn, as distracted as a randy teenager. I never thought I'd see the day. *What's* gotten into you?"

"It's what I *haven't* gotten into." His eyes were fixed on hers. "You're becoming a *distraction*, and that's a problem."

"Oh, come on. I've always been a problem for you, but now really isn't the time, Abnur. We're here on *serious* business. So," She leaned close to him, their breath rising as steam. "Be the intimidating, arrogant ass that you are, so that we can get the information we need." She sounded a lot more confident than she felt.

She was absolutely a *problem*, and, as stated, always had been one. Though, fortunately, she'd never been quite as problematic as she was now. Would he do anything about it? Send her away? Make her leave and regain the peace of solitude and concentration? No. Of course he wouldn't because he'd lost his sense. All logic where this woman was concerned seemed to have vanished entirely. He couldn't trust himself at all with her.

Tharn wondered just who the hell he'd become. Until that afternoon, he'd had a perfect grip on everything that was happening. But he'd been just as *seduced* by her as she had been by him. And

he hated himself for it! But also, it was so...*ugh!!* He spent more of his time wrestling himself into some semblance of control than anything else lately.

Her ability to swing so effortlessly between a writhing temptress, beguiled by his touch, and a brutally practical inquisitor was a thing to marvel at. In the whole of his life, he hadn't spent as much time abusing himself alone as he had inside the last month.

The warehouse side door banged open, and Tharn frowned. Decir was never early, but there he was, leading three men, not two, around a stack of crates and into view. Fortunately, all fraternizing had ceased, and instead, they'd been waiting silently, both of them stewing. Grace's face wore bald-faced surprise that it was Decir bringing their *guests*. He'd explain to her some other time about the numerous roles the valet filled.

"Would you care to explain why a third member of the palace guard is amongst your party?" Tharn folded his arms, narrowing his eyes. The three men wore similar looks of apprehension.

"This man, Portney, was approached by the individual as well, but he declined the offer of gold." Decir motioned to the oldest of the guards. The man was probably in his late forties at the least, his name was only vaguely familiar.

"Very well." Tharn let out a long breath, only glancing at Grace, who stared at the guards with what could only be described as disconcerting intensity. He worried a little that if she stared any harder, they might actually start on fire. "Get on with it, say your piece."

"Well, sir..." Portney stepped forward, appearing concerned, but less afraid than his younger colleagues. "Many men from that shift have a drink and some dinner before reporting to their posts. Usually at the Golden Helm. More often than not, I eat alone. The raucous nature of..."

"Irrelevant. We need to know about the offer; your personal preferences don't interest me." Tharn gave a bored sigh. It never made any sense why people always sought to pad information with additional details that meant nothing. It didn't even matter to him whether or not they'd taken the gold. The only significant thing was information regarding the person who offered it. Portney's jaw clenched and unclenched, giving Tharn a steely stare.

"I was in a booth by myself when she approached. I don't remember her face, just the sound of her voice. She had long, dark hair and was slim. At first, I thought she was one of the whores that pick up their business there, and I told her to leave. Then she said she was the one doing the paying." The old guard's brow was furrowed, and he looked off into the distance for a moment, his memory reaching for what shreds were left of the encounter. "She offered me gold to leave my post after an hour and not return until an hour from the end of my shift. She offered it upfront. It seemed very suspicious, and I declined and again told her to leave. She got up, but then reached out to touch my hand, I pulled away before she got more than her fingertips on me."

"It seems less like magical interference and more like a compound she had on her skin." Grace mused aloud, looking at Tharn, who was slowly pacing, his hands clasped behind his back. "Not unlike your theory before of the substance being on the gold, but...she needed a plan to cloud the memory in case someone did turn down the gold."

"If it were on the gold, there'd be merchants all over the city with strange bouts of amnesia, it is more likely that it was on her skin." He agreed then looked at the younger guards who had yet to speak. One bore a shock of unruly red hair, the other was shaved bald. "And your experiences?"

"Much the same, milord." The red-haired one answered immediately. "All I recall is speaking with a woman, being offered a deal I couldn't refuse, and then taking the gold."

“That was the way of it, sir.” The bald one concurred. “We was sittin’ together that night.”

“It was a...substantial amount of gold, milord. My son is sick in this colder weather, and I...” Tharn put a hand up to stop Red Hair’s tale of woe.

“Your plight doesn’t matter. You were not summoned to plead your cases or make excuses. I think we’ve got about as much information as we’re going to get.” His expectations had not been high, but it was disappointingly little to go on.

“Did...did something happen that night?” Portney spoke up, concern on his weathered face.

“Yes.” It was Grace who responded, coldness in her voice. “The guards were bribed to leave that particular corridor to prevent anyone from coming to the aid of someone being attacked.” The younger guards paled, staring at her, afraid once more for what their fate might be. Even Tharn wasn’t certain what she would decide, though he hadn’t told her explicitly that it *was* her decision.

“We...we didn’t know...” Red Hair stammered.

“Obviously.” She let out a long breath. “Your posts were at a distance that would have made no difference if you were there or not. I don’t consider you to be complicit in the events of that night. You’d be chained to a wall if I thought otherwise.”

“It’s your lucky day, gentlemen. Looks like you get to live.” Tharn smirked.

“You was goin’ to kill us?” No Hair’s eyes were huge and round.

“It was up to Lady Tiradia. You have her merciful nature to thank; I might not have judged you the same. So, you will resume your posts, as usual, if you get so much as a vague inkling that something suspicious or related might be happening, you are to report it directly to me at once. You can imagine the penalty if you don’t.” Both the guards stared at Tharn, saying nothing. He rolled his eyes. “*Nod* if you understand.” They did, vigorously.

“I presume I am free to go?” Portney asked.

“You, I have a proposition for. If you’re interested, come to my chambers first thing tomorrow to discuss. It’ll be worth your while if you do.”

Half Past Midnight

20th cont....no, 21st of Frostfall

“Even though they *all* remember interacting with a woman, there’s no guarantee that it *is* a woman. Illusionary spells, an infusion even that could make others believe the person had the appearance of a woman. Nothing is certain.” Grace made a frustrated sound as she and Abnur made their way back to the palace. It was late, she had no idea how late, but her mind was wide awake.

“There *are* other avenues for acquiring information.” He offered.

“*Your* avenues are rife with espionage, threats of violence, and actual violence.”

“Weigh that against your feelings of suffocation, revoked freedom, and concern for your safety.” He was right, of course, even if he *was* being manipulative to speed the process along. “In regard to violence, correct me if I’m wrong, which I’m not...but, did I, or did I *not* witness firsthand as you condemned two men to die by daedric copulation?”

“That was different. They weren’t innocent.”

“And you seem to think that my methods *harm* innocent people?”

“Don’t they?” She glared at him. All her frustrations seemed to fuse together in an angry amalgamation, churning dangerously.

“No. I don’t intentionally harm innocent people. You should know better.” Abnur scoffed. “That doesn’t mean I won’t scare them if I think it will lead to pertinent information. In matters such as this, we do what we must.”

“If I let you do this, I want to be part of it every step of the way. Maybe not actively, since I couldn’t spy my way out of a cabbage sack, but I want to know what’s going on.” She stopped as they stood outside the door of the apartment.

“Of course. Do you think I’d *willingly* subject myself to one of your outbursts if you thought I was keeping some part of the investigation from you?” It was difficult to tell if he was being an ass or just being facetious. Often, with him, the two were indistinguishable. “I will warn you, though, that agreeing to it means a good deal of your life will be rifled through in an attempt to find any sort of connection with whoever this person is.”

Grace had no earth-shattering secrets, but she still didn’t like the idea of her entire existence being completely exposed. Exposed to who, though? Abnur, who already knew most of her dirty secrets? He *was* one of them, after all. And whoever he hired to do the digging would know. She assumed Decir, since he was apparently a good deal more than just Abnur’s valet. The only dangerous things anyone could know about her weren’t items that could be unearthed, so to speak. The real secrets resided in her mind and nowhere else.

“I think I need a drink.” She let out a long breath, intentionally not answering him one way or the other.

“So do I. Come. I’ve just had several bottles arrive today from my private collection.” Abnur opened the door, and they went inside.

The place was silent and mostly dark, as expected. After ten o'clock, even Nalea went to bed. Abnur lit a couple of the lamps in his study before opening the doors of his wine cabinet. It did look fuller than the last time she saw its contents. He pulled out different bottles, examining the labels before putting them back, then finally selected one. Grace lit the fire as he did the uncorking, and she warmed her hands. Every night felt colder than the last as winter crept closer. It was tempting to find someplace warm to go until the weather here was tolerable again. There were some lovely islands off the coast of Hammerfell.

"Here." Abnur put a glass in her hand before going back to his desk.

She murmured her thanks and sipped. It was a bit sweeter than he usually drank, she thought, but it tasted fresh and crisp anyway. Abnur drank his, pushing around the envelopes on his desk, seeing who had sent him what. He opened one, setting the goblet down and started reading, his free hand unfastening the hooks of his jacket near his throat.

"You don't respond to your mother's letters?"

"Why would I? They're full of her unhinged ranting and raving and scolding me as if I were sixteen instead of a grown woman." Grace rolled her eyes, taking another swallow of wine, but stopped. "Wait, why?"

"Now, she's writing to *me*."

"*What?*"

"Yes, she wants to know if you've been cut off from the outside world and forced into my servitude. She must not know you very well." He chuckled softly, reading on.

"She knows me well enough; she just likes writing inflammatory letters thinking it will urge people to respond."

"Perhaps you should invite her for a visit." The wicked smile on his lips implied nothing good. The resulting nightmare from such a thing would be unbearable.

"Don't be ridiculous." Grace snatched the letter from his hand and scanned it. It was more pleading than hysterical, and she sighed. "I suppose I'll send her something to allay her concerns." Abnur finished unfastening his jacket before emptying his glass. Taking the letter back, he tossed it onto the desk, and then plucked the drink from her hand, setting it aside. "What—"

He kissed her, and it wasn't the teasing, somewhat restrained embrace it usually was. It was deep, probing, laden with intent. Leaning into him, her arms encircled his neck.

"Didn't you say *not today?*" She breathed when he pulled back.

"It's half past midnight."

Abnur's fingers moved over her jacket fastenings, then there was a flurry of movement from them both, tugging and pulling at the buttons and garments of one another, Grace cursing the decision to wear her leathers. However exciting, it was very strange to see him undressing; he'd never so much as adjusted a sleeve in her presence, but here he was, peeling off layer after layer. Her own jacket was discarded somewhere, and she sat on the couch, yanking open the buckles on her boots before pulling one and then the other off. Hooking her thumbs beneath the waistband of her leggings, she started wriggling out of them as well as the linen britches she wore beneath. Abnur, already in just his shirt, grabbed her pants, which were at her knees, pulling them the rest of the way off.

Finally, finally, finally... Grace's heart was pounding in her chest, and as he put a knee on the sofa, she laid back on the cushions, unable to look away. Fumbling, she undid the buttons running down the front of her shirt, and he reached back, pulling his off before tossing it down. Aside from in her imagination, she'd never seen Abnur au naturel. He was fitter than she expected, and her eyes hungrily roamed his naked body. There were scars from battles, something else she hadn't considered. Distantly, she hoped to get the chance to ask him about them and imagined what he looked like fighting; the way his body moved, the muscles twisting and contracting, his face with teeth bared in concentration. He bore a powerful countenance. But that didn't matter right *now*.

There was coarse gray hair across his chest, and a narrow trail of it that descended his abdomen. Grace's eyes followed it, and then lingered on what she'd so far only come in contact with through layers of fabric. Though Abnur was pushing a hundred and fifty-three, he did not lack in virility. He was not lacking in any way at all, actually. His arrogance and posturing certainly wasn't because he needed to compensate.

He sat, one leg under him, the other still on the floor. Each of hers was on either side of him. His view was obscured by the edge of the unbuttoned shirt Grace still wore. With a small tug, the fabric slid sideways off of her abdomen, and she watched as he looked at her. It was a bit unnerving to lie there under his gaze. She wasn't paying him, this wasn't his job. Abnur was on this sofa with her because he wanted to be, and she wanted him to like her. *All* of her. The desire for approval was a strange, foreign sensation to her. Hopefully it would go away.

Slowly, his fingertips trailed up from her ankles to her knees, which he then pressed wide apart. His palms were hot as he slid them down the inside of her thighs.

"How did you imagine this?" Abnur's eyes met hers.

"What? Us together?" Her chest rose and fell as she grasped for an answer. "I've imagined it every way." It was the truth. The smile on her lips was almost bashful. Whether she was alone or paying for company, it was most often his face and his voice that she thought of. He leaned forward, his mouth pressed against the inside of her knee. A very faraway shred of a voice warned her what sort of trouble *actually* being his lover would bring. But, Grace was becoming increasingly skilled when it came to ignoring such things. It was that much easier to ignore as Abnur's lips and the rasping of his beard moved downward.

She'd been with some of the most skilled lovers-for-gold in the whole of Tamriel, and their ministrations weren't holding a candle to the feel of this man's tongue as it left her thigh and met with her slippery flesh. Why was that? She'd done this before, countless times, but her breath never caught like this, her fingers never itched and begged to touch. Somehow, the feel of his hair in her fists felt as delightful as his mouth did on her.

Abnur pulled back just as the whirling tension had begun its approach to finality. *Bastard*. Her nerve endings screamed in protest. But, he wouldn't disappoint and came down over her. He settled between her legs, braced on his hands, and his eyes didn't leave hers. The weight of him pressing her into the cushions spurred her hips to move involuntarily against him, seeking.

Both of them were breathing fast, and Grace slid her hands up Abnur's arms and shoulders, then pulled him down to fully lay upon her. She kissed him, pouring forth her longing, silently urging him on, his response felt like a promise, but he broke from the kiss, watching her for a long moment.

"This is what you want?" He was actually asking, not teasing her, and Grace blinked. Then, for a brief moment, she rummaged through herself to grasp a verbal response. Words were getting more challenging to take hold of, though.

“Have I somehow been unclear about that?”

“Under the circumstances, it seems prudent to make sure.” He was there, poised to do what they’d been not-doing for years now, and her impatience was mounting. He was right to ask, though, and there were no delusions that his question was out of consideration. It was self-preservation, and she couldn’t fault him for that.

“Yes. This is what I—” Grace made a loud, startled sound as he was suddenly buried full length inside her. They were still for a moment, and she relished the fullness she felt. His gaze was fixed on her face, studying her reactions. Yes, she’d wanted this for a very long time. To feel him, to take pleasure from his body, to be this close with a mind like her own. She pressed her hips up against him, and he started to move. His lips parted as he drew back then thrust hard, jarring her.

The air around them was cold, but Grace’s body had grown warmer, holding onto Abnur as she moved against him. They were both impatient, wound too tightly from the weeks of buildup. The afternoon’s office romp had done little to relieve either of them, in fact serving only to make it worse. It seemed unlikely that this embrace would be very lengthy for either of them as he slid one arm underneath her.

Her eyes were closed, every sense heightened. The hair on Abnur’s chest rasped against her breasts, her nipples hard and sensitive to the friction with every thrust. She felt the heat of his breath against the side of her face, then tasted wine as he kissed her roughly, invading her mouth with his tongue. She sucked and stroked it with her own. He groaned and moved harder, both of them panting with the effort.

Grace’s muscles began to tense as the throbbing pressure at her core increased, the soft moans growing louder and more insistent. Her eyes squeezed shut tight as she concentrated and Abnur grabbed the arm of the sofa with one hand for leverage, one foot on the floor as he pushed harder. The sound she made was almost pleading. Then with his other hand, he gripped a fistful of her hair, forcing her to look up at him. His bright blue eyes had never looked so dark as his brow started to furrow, a line appearing there. His teeth clenched, he grunted...then her world came apart. Her face twisted, and her voice echoed undoubtedly through the entire apartment. With heels dug in, she bucked against him as everything reformed and shattered again and again in rapid succession.

“Yes...” He murmured, driving into her with dizzying force. With an expression that looked like pain, he almost crushed her in his arms, letting out a loud, strangled cry. The cords of his neck stood out as his body trembled, his hips twitching as he finished. Abnur collapsed onto Grace, supporting himself just enough not to smother her.

There was a loud whooshing in her ears as every inch of her skin felt like electric. One arm was around Abnur’s neck, the other his back, and his face buried in her hair. The whooshing slowly grew fainter, and she heard only the sound of their breath. It was done. It had finally happened.

Now what? Besides feeling sated at last, for the moment, at least, Grace wasn’t sure how she felt. She didn’t want to move, not just yet. They’d go from this comfortable silence to sniping comments as usual. The quiet felt nice, another body against hers felt nice.

It wasn’t a stranger this time or some casual dalliance. She *liked* him; she had ever since they’d started their periodic conversations many years earlier when Silero was busy, and she’d sneak away to pester the chancellor. She’d always made sure to badger him with interesting, complicated questions that he wouldn’t be able to resist.

This wasn’t what she wanted to be thinking about, though, she didn’t want her mind going down *that* particular path. Reminiscing, fostering her affection, feeding it. Not when the person it was for

would scoff and scowl at her if he knew. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. It was the biggest secret she had, one she kept even from herself most of the time.

Abnur shifted, and she quickly schooled her face as best she could. Her thoughts and feelings were usually apparent, unfortunately, and if he looked into her eyes and saw her fondness for him, she feared it would all be over with. But he peered down, eyes hooded as she steeled herself, ready for a quip. It was rarely that she felt vulnerable, and much to her frustration now was one such occasion. She decided then to get the ball rolling.

“Satisfied?” She breathed. “Can I finish my wine now?” He smiled, and it was very unsettling. He’d smiled at her plenty of times, usually a smirk accompanied with some acerbic remark. His mind must be as addled at hers.

“For the moment.” He moved his hips, and Grace’s entire body jerked, still sensitive, but she felt him slip out. It was...a *strange* sensation and her face clearly reflected it because he laughed outright, pushing himself up a bit. He kissed her unexpectedly, and she stared with wide eyes until he pulled back. “Get your wine, *lush*. Fill my glass, too.”

They disentangled, and she held her shirt closed, getting to her feet. Her legs felt a little wobbly, but she cleared her throat, striding to where her half-full wineglass sat on Abnur’s desk. She sipped then went to the sidebar where the bottle was.

“Half or whole?” She asked, glancing back to where he sat, still naked. She blushed. After *that*, she still fucking *blushed*. Chewing the inside of her cheek, she took the bottle with her.

“Whole, I think. I’m feeling parched.” His eyes were on her. “Hm, maybe subservience suits you. Your mother might be right.” He wore a more familiar smirk as Grace handed him his glass.

“Please, for the love of all things sacred and holy, do not mention my mother while you’re naked.” She sat beside him, though, sipping her drink. He chuckled.

“Apologies.” He didn’t sound even a little sorry. “So, you never answered.”

“Answered what?” She looked at him dumbly. Had he asked her something at some point in the midst of things? *Shit*.

“If you’d allow me to utilize the other avenues of information acquisition.” He shook his head as if being forced to talk to an imbecile. Already she felt more comfortable, relieved even.

“Ah, that.” Well, there were no skeletons in any closets, no bodies to unearth. None that Abnur didn’t already have a hand in, anyway. “Alright. But, like I said, I want to be kept in the loop about everything.”

“Of course.” He stood and moved toward his desk. Grace took the opportunity to admire him from behind. Imperials had a thing or two to learn from the fashion of other cultures, particularly the cultures that believed in more fitted trousers. Belted tunics undoubtedly kept many glorious backsides from being properly admired.

Abnur strutted about with precisely the same posture and attitude as he did when fully clothed. Not that it was particularly surprising. His state of undress changed nothing about him. Grace finished her wine, feeling the desire to have his skin beneath her fingers once again.

“I wish your avenues better luck than we’ve had.” She got up and set the glass on the sidebar.

“I have no doubt.” He shrugged. “At this hour, though, it’s a discussion better left for tomorrow.

It's time for us to retire to bed, I think."

"Yes, you're probably right." Stifling a yawn, she bent to pick up one of her stockings. She didn't even remember taking it off.

"Leave it."

"What?"

"It'll be taken care of in the morning."

"If I'm going to bed, I might as well just take my things..."

"I meant retire to *my* bed." Abnur clarified with an arched a brow at her. She noticed then that he was already starting to recover from their exertions.

"*Oh.*"

The Mourning After

21st of Frostfall

On a typical day, Tharn rose before dawn, completed his morning routine, gathered what he needed, and would be at his desk before any of the other staff had arrived for their duties. Today, he was *late*. Not only was the sun high in the sky, shining brightly, but midday was a scant two hours away. He was *very* late on a day full of appointments. He'd planned to talk to that old guard first thing, Chutney, or whatever his name was. The meeting after that was supposed to have been with Clivia. It wasn't much of a tragedy to reschedule that. Any discussion with her would have made him this late to other obligations anyway.

He could have been on time, or at least not quite as delayed. He'd been woken at a reasonable time, but unfortunately...or fortunately...what had woken him was a hot, wet mouth on his cock. It would have been rude not to return the favor, of course. So, after his subsequent reciprocation, he took her face down, hips smacking against that broad, glorious ass of hers. Then they'd gone again, slowly, face to face. Her body beneath his as they moved together, the way she took his face between her hands, the sounds she made when she... His groin gave a throb. *Damn it all to Oblivion*. He was Abnur Tharn, he was *above* such ridiculous musing; he was a pillar of control and concentration. How was he supposed to bloody *focus*, knowing what he could expect at the end of his day? The novelty would no doubt wear off eventually. This newfound idiocy of his was temporary.

As Tharn entered the chancellery, his secretary hurled himself from his chair to scurry alongside him to provide updates.

"Mr. Portney has been rescheduled for this evening after his shift. The Empress...seems to think you will be casting aside all other appointments to see to her upon your arrival." The young man shuffled the sheets of parchment he was holding, quickly adjusting his spectacles.

"I will not be doing that."

"I thought not, milord, so I gave the standard response. And now, you have thirty minutes before your ten-thirty council briefing. Everything else on the schedule seems in order so far. No changes as of yet. Here are the correspondences and messages that arrived for you so far today." He handed Tharn a small bundle of envelopes and was promptly waved off.

Tharn took a seat at his desk, pleased to find hot coffee waiting. He hadn't slept much, after all. There were worse ways to be kept awake, though. The blame lay with the eager, naked woman he'd left in his bed.

The thought struck him as odd. Grace was in *his* bed. Tharn had a long memory and couldn't recall the last time there had been a woman in his bed. Before gladly becoming a longtime widower, he'd visit his wives in their quarters when necessary. And for enjoyment, he went elsewhere, never daring to bring whores to his places of residence. One does not shit where one eats, after all.

Perhaps he would leave the City for a spell, and take her somewhere remote and comfortable, to make up for the last...when had she come of age? He counted silently; *seventeen* years they might have been enjoying themselves. There wasn't anything monumental impending that really required his presence. Well, besides the damned investigation, which *was*, unfortunately, a matter of import.

Tharn quickly glanced at his schedule for the day. He was pleased to see that after the briefing, Decir was due to arrive. He'd give the valet instructions for combing through Grace's life, and Decir would get to the bottom of things. Besides, if necessary, Tharn could easily manage things remotely.

Every muscle in Grace's body ached. She never realized how inactive she was during her other *carnal engagements*. Abnur inspired a level of enthusiasm she hadn't quite experienced before. And his sinfully comfortable bed definitely seemed to alleviate some of the pain caused by that enthusiasm. She wriggled over to his side and buried her face against the pillow. It had to be getting close to noon. She'd have liked it better had he decided to stay in bed all day. Some things were worth shirking all responsibility for.

Grace let out a long sigh. She *did* have things to do, though. Responsibilities...well, things that mattered to her, anyway. She served no official purpose, held no office or position, and did not have a profession. It was an oddly disheartening thought. Her existence consisted solely of exploring things she found interesting and bedding when the urge arose. Her charitable contributions to education and the sustainability of the smaller, struggling villages didn't constitute much in the way of *official* usefulness, considering that she did most of it anonymously.

She sat up just as Nalea came bustling into the room, and both women made startled noises, neither having expected the other.

"Oh! Milady...I did not realize you were in here..." The housekeeper was clutching her chest but quickly straightened up. She seemed perplexed, somehow, as if it was incredibly strange to find the chancellor's mistress, or whatever she was, *lover?* in his bed.

"Er...sorry. I was lounging about longer than intended..." Grace hastily tugged the sheet up. She glanced at the floor where she thought her shirt had been discarded the night before. It was gone; likely, Abnur had taken it. And done what with it?

"Ah, just a moment." Nalea disappeared into a dark closet and reappeared with a dressing gown of Abnur's, holding it out.

"Thanks." Grace murmured, blushing crimson. "And sorry about the mess in the study...I was going to pick up my things, but..." Her voice trailed off.

"Think nothing of it, milady."

"It's... well, you know." She put the robe on but noticed the strange look Nalea was still giving her. "What's the matter?"

"What? There's no matter, milady, my apologies..."

"Has something happened?"

"Nothing's happened...I've just never encountered any guests...in here...in the chancellor's bedchamber. Before." Nalea quickly started straightening various things, the color in her cheeks intensifying. It wasn't something she was probably supposed to reveal. It wasn't a surprise, though, that Abnur kept his sleeping quarters entirely to himself, which made it intriguing that he'd invited her in.

“Ah, I see...”

“I will inform Hester that you’re up.” The housekeeper hurried out, leaving Grace standing a little confused. It was no matter, though.

When she returned to her own rooms, Hester was already running a bath and looking fairly surprised herself at the turn of events. Grace’s clothes from the night before were draped on the foot of her bed, having been brought in from the study. She wondered idly what the staff thought about such things, if they discussed it amongst themselves or if they truly didn’t think about what their master was up to. Or *in* to.

“I thought it was strange that your bed was undisturbed this morning, milady.” Hester came out of the bath chamber and quickly grabbed up the clothes, carrying them into the wardrobe.

“I spent the night with Abnur.” Grace rubbed the fine fabric of the dressing gown between her fingers, fully intending to keep it for herself. Surely, he had others.

“But I thought you weren’t actually...”

“And what led you to *that* conclusion?” She narrowed her eyes at the diminutive woman who didn’t shrink but gave a shrug.

“I’m your lady’s maid...I care for your clothes, your bedding, your person...there is nothing secret. I know when you’re unwell, when you’re bleeding, when you’ve been to the brothel...” There was no judgment in Hester’s observations. “It’s my job to know about you and to take care of things. To help serve you...”

“You’re right, of course.” Grace let out a long breath. It was difficult to keep her mind from wandering to the previous night *and* the morning. Neither had gone as she had expected, which had been a lovely surprise. Amid the delectable reveries, however, her concerns about her overall usefulness continued to interrupt.

She went to the bath chamber and let down her hair before feeling the water temperature in the tub. With the robe hung, she stepped in and slowly sat down, the heat seeping into her stiff muscles. She slid down until the water was at her chin.

What would life have been like if she’d remained in training at the Battle Spire? Grace was reasonably confident that she’d have climbed the ranks quickly, but eventually, attention would have been drawn to her long-lasting youth, and it wouldn’t take more than a fairly clever person to realize she wasn’t all human. She hadn’t explained that to anyone, though, when she left the training. It was assumed she simply wanted to be a scholar instead. Even Abnur didn’t know that particular bit, but then, they never mentioned the fact that she was half-Dunmer.

The mood declined further as she thought about his strict ideas regarding bloodlines and the purity of such. What did he *really* think of her? To the rest of the world, she was a noblewoman from Nibenay. She looked like one, talked like one, walked like one; so, it was no surprise to them that Abnur Tharn would have taken up with her. But he knew what she was. He knew that she was as much mer as man. He’d never said anything in her presence, but there was no doubt about the harshness of his opinions regarding those thought of as *tainted*. He hated Colovians, and they *were* human.

Grace’s ability to rain on her own parade bordered on legendary. She never let herself feel *too* much, lest she have something to lose. For the whole of her life, she’d reined in her feelings about intimate involvement of any kind. That was why her sexual escapades primarily consisted of

prostitutes. She paid for them to leave as much as she paid them for their services. It was easy to stay detached in a business transaction.

She called it being realistic, but really it was pessimism and self-sabotage in a thinly veiled guise of pragmatism. In this instance, it seemed even more called-for than ever. She couldn't afford the inevitable effects of rejection. She'd seen often enough the devastation of her peers as their hopes and desires were scattered to the wind for whatever reasons. Long had she glared in the face of intimacy and genuine affection for anyone who was not family.

Meanwhile, she'd *befriended* a man who was even more repulsed by sentiment than she was. The difference was that he managed to successfully keep from falling prey to the absurdity of *feelings*. And here she was, tearing herself to pieces for being so fucking foolish.

"Milady?" Hester's gentle voice shooed away the shadows, and Grace blinked, looking up at her. "Are you alright?"

"What?"

"You...you're..." Hester reached up to touch her own cheek and mortified, Grace wiped at hers, shaking her head.

"No, no. Soap." She lied. "Help me wash my hair, please. I have to get to the archives."

It was well past midday when Grace finally arrived at her office. Hereic gave a wave as she entered, intensely focused on his tasks. There was catching up to do in her daily log, believing it to be a methodical, scientific recounting of her experiences. She'd been documenting her daily activities since she was a girl. It was due in part to a strange, irrational fear she'd developed early on, of forgetting something that might be important. There was an entire shelf in her quarters back home to house the sheer volume of filled journals.

About an hour had passed as Grace worked to the sound of silence punctuated only by the periodic muttering or excited noises of Hereic as he made whatever discoveries he was making. She hated to think that someday she might not have his help anymore. So, naturally, in the vein of her earlier melancholy rumination, she thought about it extensively.

When a knock sounded, she bid the visitor enter, and Decir strolled in. Hereic looked immediately nervous, expecting the valet's master to be in tow, but he was not.

"Good afternoon, milady. May I?" He gestured to the chair in front of her desk.

"Please. What can I do for you?"

"I believe it's what I can do for *you*." Decir smiled politely but glanced at Hereic.

"Don't worry about him."

"Very well. The chancellor and I spoke at length regarding the information you have both been seeking." He started. "He indicated that you've consented to have me do some of the legwork to try and unearth anything useful."

"Yes, do what you must. Your assistance and your discretion are appreciated. If you find yourself needing to interact with any of my acquaintances or family members, I imagine there's no need to emphasize the necessity of not alarming them. My family in particular." Grace sat back, noting for

the first time how much more of a dangerous man Decir seemed to be than she'd previously thought. He filled the role of harmless valet very well.

"Of course, milady. No one will be any wiser."

"I assume Abnur's insisted you report to him first with any of your findings before telling me?" She was not even slightly surprised when he did nothing more than smile. "Right. Well, best of luck to you."

"I won't fail you, milady."

There was only one reason for light to be coming from beneath Tharn's bedchamber door. He smiled to himself; she was in there *waiting*. He could speculate what he might find, or he could stop wasting time guessing. With no further hesitation, he went inside, but paused, seeing Grace asleep on her stomach at the edge of the bed.

One lamp was lit, and there was an open book that her head rested on. *And* she was wearing his dressing gown. He moved closer and sighed, noticing that she'd drooled ever so slightly on the page. How very charming. The ink had smeared, as well. The book, though, was not one he'd have wanted her to find. By the header on the page, he could see it was a dissertation regarding the theoretical deficiencies of the intellect of mer and beast races. Of all the things for her to choose, she had to pick the arrogant ramblings of his much less wise younger self. He didn't quite hold those opinions anymore. Not in that form, anyway.

She'd always been concerned about her heritage, he knew. There was no need for explanation when she would ever so slightly cringe or shrink at the merest mention of the Dunmer. She cared little for the thoughts of strangers, but he wasn't an idiot, he knew that his opinion mattered to her, no matter how much she pretended otherwise.

Tharn was a hypocrite, though. In his mind, nothing he'd ever thought or said about the purity of bloodlines, or the mixing of man and mer, applied to her. *She* was exempt...and he had no rational reason for why, and he was not about to explore any irrational reasons.

How upset was she? What sort of a diatribe would she go on? Carefully, he took the book and pulled it away from her, which jostled her awake, as expected. She blinked slowly, looking at him, then stifled a yawn.

He frowned at her. "Why are you reading this garbage?"

"You wrote it."

"Did you look at the date? I wrote it before your grandfather was born."

"Cradle-robber." She rolled over, stretching, the dressing gown falling open to reveal the nothing she wore beneath it. Gods, he hoped she didn't intend to engage in an inevitable unpleasant discussion right that minute, because he wanted very much to have her right then and there. "Does it make it more exciting for you?" Damn it.

"Does what?" He knew what.

"The taboo of bedding a half-breed." She sat up, closing the robe. Tharn let out a long breath, trying to determine the best course of action for putting this topic to bed, so that he could then put *her* to bed.

"I hadn't thought about it." It was a minor untruth. He hadn't thought about it in the way she was at the moment. He'd thought about the advantages and benefits she had because of her Dunmer blood. It was almost impossible to burn her, and her skills with fire magic were unmatched. She was powerful and indeed made stronger by the dual-parentage. Something his self-absorbed younger self had yet to take into consideration when writing this. Not that it would have inspired him to take a mer or half-mer to wife.

"Bullshit."

"I cannot convince you otherwise. Once you've latched onto an idea, you shake it until it is dead." He rolled his eyes and tossed the book into the fireplace. It wasn't his only copy, but she didn't know that, so the gesture would at least *appear* meaningful. "If it's what you want to believe, I can't stop you..."

"I'm not sure how I'm expected to believe otherwise."

"Why does it matter?"

"I find it bothersome to be thought of as a less-worthy person because of something I had no choice about." She *was* upset. Had she always been emotional, or was this a new development since the night before? No. She always had been, to some degree. Though, she'd deny it till her dying breath.

"Bothersome? Look at you, pouting like some disparaged child." As he intended, she shifted quickly from upset to angry. Angry was *much* preferable to deal with, fire or not.

"I knew this was a mistake." She put her legs over the bedside to get up, but he stood in front of her.

"What? Searching about my library to find something to get angry about? Yes. That was stupid. And pointless. I cannot fathom what you hoped to accomplish by it." A half-truth. Tharn knew Grace better than she thought, and though he paid little credence to emotional outbursts, he fully understood the mechanisms of why people had them. Often, he used them to his advantage. One did not amass his wealth and power by being ignorant of the effects of emotions and the ways in which they could be manipulated.

Years ago, he'd watched her sabotage what could have been a spectacular career as a battlemage because of what she felt, what she *feared*. If she thought things would end badly with him, she'd sabotage this too. He preferred to continue, but if she insisted on leaving, so be it. He wouldn't chase her or give hollow validation just to make her feel better. She was a rational person, usually. Either she'd come to her senses or she wouldn't.

"I did not go searching." She lied.

"You don't think I know where each and every one of my books are? That one was in the back of a cupboard, Grace." Tharn gave her a level look, folding his arms. Her green eyes were fixed on him and despite the nature of the discussion he was painfully aware of her state of undress. "If you truly thought that it makes any difference who your parents are, you'd have kicked in my office door regardless of my appointments and thrown it on my desk. Or at my face."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Please. I've witnessed more of your temper tantrums in the last two decades than your own family has." He stepped closer and put his hands on her knees. "For as much as I can appreciate an analytical mind, some things are better left alone." He slowly pushed her legs apart as he moved, standing between them. The pace of her breath had changed markedly. "You want to know what I think?" He took her hand and put it against him. She didn't look surprised, of course, but her lips parted slightly before she reached beneath his tunic and took hold of him.

"I suppose *this* doesn't lie."

Comfortable Silences

21st of Frostfall – Cont.

It would be a frigid day in Infernace before Grace ever told Abnur that he was right. There was already plenty he could, and did, hang over her head. She gave in to him too easily, as she always had. Her thoughts were wandering unchecked as she watched him. He was sprawled on his back, the coverlet pulled up only to his waist. One arm was folded behind his head, his other hand resting across his middle as he slept. All her life, he'd managed to effortlessly rein her in, and she hated it. But she didn't hate it.

It was true. Grace had been looking for a good reason to be angry with him. Pain and anger were great motivators, and if she felt hurt, well, then she could take back the influence she so freely let him have over her. Couldn't she? For all their disagreements over the years, never once had it been about *what* she was. They'd both had said terrible things to one another on plenty of occasions, but her Dunmeri blood had never come into play.

Her gaze wandered away from the flat plane of his abdomen to move along the walls of the bedchamber. This was *his* bed, in *his* rooms. It was the place where he went to be alone...to be his unfiltered self. Not that there was probably much difference between Abnur filtered and unfiltered. His thoughts and opinions always fell from his mouth unhindered; tact be damned.

There were piles of books on almost every horizontal surface, as well as rolled-up scrolls, parchment full of notes, and a small desk buried in tomes and writing implements. It wasn't a space he intended anyone to see. So private an area, it was more personal than his other offices and libraries. And she'd been invited in. She'd slept beside him, which to some might not have seemed particularly poignant, but this was a man whose own relatives would have merrily slain him in his sleep, given the opportunity. He trusted her not to kill him. That was a big deal for a Tharn.

"Stop it." He murmured suddenly, not asleep after all.

"Stop what?" Grace frowned. She was on her stomach, hugging a pillow.

He let out a long breath. "I can hear you *analyzing* from here."

"That's the price you pay for bedding an intelligent woman."

"Do I have to *make* you stop thinking?"

"I thought you were exhausted." She smiled, biting her lower lip. If he was offering, she certainly wasn't about to say no.

"If you want quantity over quality, I'll do what I must to secure some peace..."

"What a chore it would be, I'm sure. The pain and suffering that goes into pleasuring a woman who doesn't actually lay there like a corpse, waiting for it to be over with." Grace noted the subtle stirring beneath the coverlet.

"You're a very demanding, wanton, tart, do you know that?"

"If I'm a wanton tart, what does that make you?"

“A man.” He smirked.

“An *ass* is what you are.” She reached out to give his chest hair a little tug, but he trapped her hand before she could pull.

“No.” His eyes stayed closed.

“I thought you liked that.”

“You must be thinking of your Altmer whore.”

“Oh. Maybe.” She grinned as Abnur opened one eye to glare at her. She moved and pinched his nipple instead, and he inhaled sharply through his nose. “Ah, right, *that’s* it.” He switched gears, though, abruptly enough to make her head spin.

“Tell me about Emedia Audtidenius.” He opened both eyes as Grace pulled her hand back at once. The noise she made was one of annoyance and disgust.

“And just like that, I’m not aroused anymore.” She sighed. “*Why* would you ask me about her of all people?”

“Decir thinks she’s worth being aware of.”

“She’s a vicious, jealous, cutthroat bitch who isn’t nearly as clever as she thinks. What exactly is he doing? Going around asking everyone in the vicinity if they hate me?”

“More or less.”

“*What?*” She pushed herself up to sit at his side, facing him, then pulled the blanket over her bare breasts, half uncovering Abnur in the process.

He shrugged, though, putting both arms behind his head. “He only managed to speak with your assistants so far.”

“Seems he’s keeping *you* well informed.”

“What do you think I pay him for?” He eyed her as she shifted in visible discomfort.

“Yes, yes.” Grace truly had no desire to discuss Emedia, particularly as she was sitting there in the nude. That woman could and did make every other woman feel inadequate and unattractive.

“What do you know about her?”

“She’s part of the archives, I’m not really sure what her role is. I’ve encountered her a number of times over the years, and she’s made a pointed effort to be a thorn in my side.”

“Does she hate you enough to get you raped?”

“I hadn’t thought so. Her usual method typically involves ripping out the throats of people’s careers, thereby creating a vacancy she can charm or seduce her way into.” Despite the active enmity between her and Emedia, it hadn’t occurred to Grace that the raven-haired beauty might be the one responsible for what happened. “She’s always thrived on the failure of others, not bodily harm. Not to my knowledge, anyway. But I *guess* it’s possible she’s sunken to new, even more depraved lows.”

“And in what way did you slight her to earn such loathing?” Abnur was becoming amused.

“Why do you assume I did something? I’m not the one who tears others down to get ahead.” She scoffed. “I *try* to avoid people in general.”

“There must be something.”

“She doesn’t think I deserve much of what I’ve accomplished, and says often and loudly that coming from a noble family has given me undue advantages over others in the field of academia.”

“Of course it has.” Abnur shook his head as though she was ridiculous to refute it. “We have privilege and access to anything and everything we could possibly want or need. That’s the *point* of having wealth and power.”

“Well, maybe you do. I’m not quite as comfortable as a *Tharn*.”

“You are now.” He arched one eyebrow at her. Damn it. She really was, wasn’t she?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What haven’t I given you?” Only Abnur could make generosity into a selfish thing.

“I never asked for any of it.” She fidgeted under his gaze. The way he was looking at her made her cheeks flush.

“Of course not. There are very few people who don’t attempt to wile their way into my good graces to use my influence as a means to some other end.”

“You’re the means *and* the end.” She blurted, then berated herself viciously for saying something so bloody stupid. That was her way, though, the more naked she was, the dumber the things were that tumbled from her lips. Grinding her teeth a little, she looked down at her hands rather than meet the piercing blue gaze so firmly fixed on her. He tilted his head a bit, though, appearing not to understand.

“Explain.” He wasn’t making fun of her, and somehow that made it that much more uncomfortable. She’d meant it half as a joke, but the problem was that she wasn’t kidding.

“Well...this is what I wanted.” She gestured vaguely between them, keeping the tone light and nonchalant lest he think she was implying anything serious. “I told you that.”

“To lie in my bed discussing semantics into the wee hours of the morning when you *should* be sleeping?” Skillfully as ever, he glossed over it, thank the Divines.

“Semantics. Theoretical arcanology. The intricacies of and differences between elemental and Daedric summoning. Matters of state. Whatever as long as it isn’t small talk and drivel.” She gave a huff. “As well as lying in your bed *not* discussing things.” She laid back down beside him, propped up on one elbow.

“But not portalcraft?” He’d seen her portal work, there was good reason why she dared not even think about it.

“Nobody’s perfect.” Idly, she touched a long scar on his side. “What battle was this?”

“None. Assassination attempt, a fourth cousin something, thrice removed. I don’t remember, but it was a valiant effort.” Abnur explained. “He died.”

“Quite horribly, I imagine.” *Why* wasn’t she appalled as she ought to have been?

“Mmhm.”

“Ah. Well, your family has always been...very special.”

“*Special* isn’t quite the word for them.” He watched as she traced the scar with one finger and moved to another, smaller one.

“Ambitious?” She offered. “Ruthless?”

“Indeed. Selfish, envious, cruel. The list goes on.” There was a long stretch of silence while her fingertips slid over his hot skin, trailing through the wiry gray hairs. “When is the last time you spoke with your nemesis?” It took Grace some serious effort not to groan.

“*Why* are we still talking about her?”

“Because it’s important. When?”

“A couple weeks ago. When the senior archivists came to interrogate me about my work, she was amongst them.” She sighed.

“Before or after what happened?”

“The day before, I think. She had no qualms about openly accusing me of spreading my legs to get the office and whatever else went along with it.”

“How did the others react?”

“They seemed unsurprised by her outbursts, for the most part. Except for the old man, I don’t think he really knows what year it is even.”

“Ortis? No. He was brilliant in his day. Merely a shadow of his former self, now. Interesting, though, that she would be so crass in the presence of the senior archivists if she is as low-born as you say.”

“I suspect that she doesn’t hide her true nature very well around those she cannot tempt.” Sullenly, Grace fidgeted with the edge of the blanket, hoping for *any* other topic.

“She comes to the chancellery at least once a week.” Abnur didn’t do her the kindness of elaborating, and she could only stare, gobsmacked.

“*What?*” Before she could funnel her outrage and unhealthy surge of jealousy into sentences, Abnur leaned over to his bedside table and blew out the candle. The resulting darkness did nothing to quell her ire. “What the fuck is she doing coming to the chancellery? I can’t imagine she has *any* business with you...”

“She doesn’t.” Abnur shifted, giving the blankets a yank to pull his share back over himself. Grace lay flat on her back, staring into the blackness above her.

“Then, why?”

“You said she hates you. Why do *you* think she goes there?” He noisily fluffed his pillow.

“To turn your head.” She muttered petulantly.

“Mmhm.”

“And does she?” Grace’s jaw clenched and unclenched.

“Does she *what*?” There was a hint of impatience in his voice.

“Turn your head.”

His voice was suddenly very close to her ear. “Please. Is *she* in my bed keeping me awake with inane yammering, or are you?”

“I will burn that bitch alive if she thinks for even a moment that...” The tirade was interrupted when Abnur’s mouth covered hers. As he knew it would, it very effectively silenced her. She turned toward him, hands sliding up his arms and shoulders. “I thought you were tired...” She murmured, but he pulled her tightly against him, kissing her harder. Her body felt conflicted between encroaching exhaustion and how nicely his thigh felt between hers.

“I am, and so are you. Be quiet and go to sleep.” Abnur’s tone was curt, authoritative, and it didn’t match how his lips brushed hers or the way he kept her pressed close. Smiling to herself, Grace relaxed against him. Sleep it was. If necessary, she could just make him late again tomorrow.

Grace’s stomach complained audibly as she made her way for the kitchen, intent on pilfering the pantry for breakfast. It was late in the morning but still morning. Unbeknownst to her, Abnur had cleared his morning schedule. Of course, he didn’t say as much until after mercilessly harrying her for being such a detrimental distraction. Not that she’d given a skeeve’s arse what he was saying at the time, considering what he’d been in the midst of *doing*.

The titillating thought was interrupted as she pushed open the pantry door to the sound of frantic shuffling and then the shocked faces of Nalea and Tievus. If they’d been up to anything in earnest, it had only just started as everyone was fully dressed with all buttons, fastenings, and lacing still intact. She stared for a long moment, searching for anything to say. Nalea’s face turned a deep, mortified red, and Tievus, predictably, didn’t bother to look even remotely ashamed.

“Um...bread and jam?” Grace finally made words. Her empty stomach seconded the inquiry, and Tievus barely kept a straight face.

“Lady Tiradia, I do beg your pardon, I...” Nalea spluttered, finally giving her cohort a shove so he’d let go of her. “This is most unprofessional and irresponsible, I know...I deeply apologize...”

“Nalea, what makes you think I care what you do behind any closed door?” Grace smiled, amused. “I’m just looking for something to eat before I go...”

“I will get you some breakfast, milady.” Face still aflame, Nalea bolted by her and out of the pantry to set about putting a plate together. “Will the chancellor be needing something as well?”

“He’s already left, fueled by scathing remarks and the tears of lesser men.” Grace stepped out of the pantry, and Tievus followed, clearing his throat a little.

“If I may, I’d like to go over the completion of the foyer and corridors while your breakfast is in process.” He straightened his jacket out, and she arched a wry brow at him.

“Mmhm.” Glancing at the still-fretting Nalea, Grace made her way out of the kitchen, the wayward designer on her heels.

“Please don’t reprimand her, Grace, it is my fault...” He whispered quickly, and she stopped, turning toward him.

“Tievus, why would I reprimand her? Do you know what *I* was doing this morning?” She folded her arms, and he nodded then.

“Ah, yes. Everyone does.” He gave a lopsided smile then winked, nudging her a little with his elbow. “I think I’m going to start experimenting with sound-dampening materials. It could be very lucrative.”

“Erm...” She felt her ears get hot. The cavernous and acoustic nature of the apartment hadn’t come to mind earlier. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Besides, milady, I plan to marry Nalea.” He puffed his chest up, and Grace’s brows arched high.

“You what?”

“I love her.” He shrugged.

“I...well...does she know that?”

“Of course!” He laughed. “We spend our off-duty time together. It was my fault this morning, I couldn’t keep my hands to myself...” There was a sparkle in his eye, he really meant it. Grace had been so wrapped up in herself that she hadn’t even noticed. “She is nervous about submitting a request to the chancellor to take a fortnight for herself so that we can have a little time...”

“I’ll make sure he is feeling generous when she does, not to worry.”

“Ah! You are a better woman than he deserves!” Tievus took her by the shoulders, planting a kiss squarely on each cheek. “Now, I’m sure you’ve noticed the completed state of most of the common spaces. My next project will be tackling the guest suites. There is one which you currently occupy, formerly the wife’s quarters, and the other which is being used as storage.”

“I didn’t realize that’s what my rooms were...”

“Well, it makes sense, does it not?” He chuckled. “So, what is the consensus of the work done so far? Has the chancellor said anything?”

“No, which means you’re doing a good job. And I quite like the changes. It’s nice to enter a space without wanting to gouge my own eyes out.”

“High praise!” Tievus grinned.

“Truly, though, I am impressed and really do admire the work you’ve done. Thank you.” Grace patted his shoulder awkwardly, as he seemed the type to be okay with such genial gestures, then took a step back. “When you go back to the kitchen to calm your poor, fretting lady, will you please tell her that I’ll take my breakfast in Abnur’s study? I’ve got a few letters to get out.”

“Yes, of course.” His delighted, ear-to-ear grin was contagious.

As she retrieved parchment, ink, and a pen, seated at Abnur’s desk, Grace wondered idly if she’d grown too comfortable. She took liberties with his space that anyone else would have never dared to. The last month had been absolute chaos, all things considered, but it still felt as if she’d been

here for much longer than that. She'd been at risk of slipping into an unshakable melancholy, and it wouldn't have been the first time. But Abnur had distracted her from it by cleverly infuriating her, and then by plucking the strings of her desires as a harpist does his instrument. He certainly had the nimble fingers for it.

Grace cleared her throat whilst also clearing her mind. She'd meant to reach out sooner to a man named Agrilius Philellian. He was the best Dwemer translator she knew, and no doubt, he would enjoy taking a look at her newest collection of artifacts. She needed to focus on what she came to this damned city to do in the first place. After all, the threat of bodily harm was greatly reduced with her recently acquired squadron of guards and Decir-the-Sneaky doing all the nosing around. Another thought occurred, though. With Agrilius would come his assistant, Talaray, an old friend of hers. Abnur would hate him immensely. Yes, she was definitely inviting them.

The Hunt Begins

24th of Frostfall

It wasn't a particularly comfortable chair for being the seat of the Grand Chancellor. Like all the rest, it sat at a measured distance from the Elder Council's massive, round, marble table. Perhaps uncomfortable chairs encouraged less dilly-dallying at meetings and kept things moving. Not privy to the goings-on of the council, Grace didn't know, and she didn't really care since it wasn't something she ever had to worry about. Her grandfather had a seat at that table, but only made it for the especially urgent summons that involved regional issues or the votes of every councilor.

A meeting of Abnur's with some noble or another had run over, and Grace sat waiting for him. Not even five minutes later, said noble left the chancellery in a huff, moving at a pace that suggested she had not accomplished whatever she'd set off to by meeting with him. As many did, she took the shortcut across the council chamber and paused, looking scandalized to see Grace in Abnur's seat. That alone was worth the wait, and she gave the shocked woman a little wave, offending her further. The brisk pace of the echoing footsteps increased, then ceased with the sound of the chamber door slamming.

"Harassing the nobility?" Abnur's voice echoed as he approached, and she glanced at him with a nonchalant shrug.

"By my sheer existence alone, apparently. There was little else to do while you kept me waiting."

"I'll make sure my staff knows to dispose of the complaints when they come in." He sighed, but one corner of his mouth turned up. "Lady Tiradia, disrespecting the high office of the chancellor by slouching in his seat at *The Table*."

"They're more than welcome to address it with me." She grinned.

"I think by now, most are sufficiently fearful of the potential repercussions of such that neither of us will hear anything of it."

"It will be whispered about instead." Grace got to her feet and gestured to the chair where Abnur then took her place. As he sat, he caught her hand and pulled her toward him so that her backside landed squarely across his lap. "I imagine *this* would be received with even more scandal."

"Does it look like I give a skeever's arse?" Abnur wrapped his arms around her, getting a handful of *her* arse in the process, and she pressed a kiss to his lips but held back just a little so he couldn't get more.

"I suppose not a lot of canoodling goes on in here."

"*Canoodling*?" He gave a snort.

"I have a hard time believing no councilperson has ever brought a lover in here to desecrate this most *sacred* and revered symbol of the governance of the empire." Would he take the bait? The idea thrilled her a bit, certainly. For as shocking as it might be to some, for a woman to readily have the majority of her sexual experiences in a brothel, those experiences had been relatively tame, all things considered.

“Is *that* what you want to do?” Abnur, having been denied her mouth, leaned forward, brushing his lips above her bodice, across the tops of her breasts. “You would defile this medium of authority with carnal sacrilege?”

“Are you very opposed? I could probably be convinced to defile some lesser chamber.”

“Opposed? No.” He took Grace by the waist and pushed her off so that she stood again. “So. Take off your clothes.” Her brows arched high as he looked up at her expectantly.

“*Off*? Lifting my skirt won’t suffice?” She glanced around, trying not to look too concerned. It was late in the evening, and just about all of the official offices were vacated well before then on a Fredas.

“Grace, if we’re going to profane this place of *reverence*, best do it right. Off.” He gestured at her dress, and she smirked.

“Very well, *chancellor*.” She kept her eyes on him as she unlaced her bodice, tugging it open. Next, she unfastened the silver clips on each shoulder, and the dress slid noiselessly to the floor.

“Everything,” Abnur answered her question as she looked at her stockings before she could even ask it. Without a word, she stepped out of her simple slippers then leaned back against the cold, marble edge of the table. She peeled off one stocking, then the other before he gave his next order. “Sit on the table.” He was enjoying himself, of course. It wasn’t often that she did as she was told without question. His desire was plain on his face, as well as evident beneath his dark blue tunic.

The table’s surface was starkly cold against Grace’s bare skin, and as she sat, she inhaled sharply, which made Abnur smirk that much more.

“So, it’s a power thing.” She observed, sitting with her legs crossed.

“What makes you say that?” Abnur, intrigued, arched one brow.

“You’re the most powerful man in the Empire and have been for more than a century. You’re seated where you wield that power, and your cock’s getting harder as a naked woman describes the influence you have.”

“Is it *wrong* to have pride in one’s accomplishments?” He stroked his beard with one hand, the other twitching as he obviously wished to touch something else. Either her or himself, she wasn’t sure. Likely a combination, one she’d gladly partake in.

“No, but I find it interesting that despite your preoccupation with your own *greatness*, you’re here with me, someone who doesn’t care a single bit about it.” She uncrossed her legs, resting her feet on his knees. His attention was drawn immediately to where she knew it would be. “Because it makes you feel more powerful to bend me to your will, especially in a place where the world is at your fingertips.” Slowly she pushed his knees farther apart, watching how the blue fabric moved over the increasing *interruption* in his lap. It might have been funny if she hadn’t wanted him so badly.

“I’ve never bent you to my will.” He shook his head but couldn’t hide the fact that his breath was coming faster. “Tell me, when have you done anything that *wasn’t* something you wanted?” Grace agreed with his assessment. The only person who’d tried to make her do something she *didn’t* want to do had died some weeks earlier because of it. Abnur continued with his orders, though. “Lean back...and touch yourself.”

She was the tiniest bit shocked, but the possibility of being interrupted had luckily vanished from

her thoughts. Propped on one hand behind her, she started at her neck, fingertips skimming across her collarbones, her own skin hot to the touch, despite sitting on chilly marble.

“I suppose you’re *not* getting undressed?” She breathed, but he slowly shook his head as her fingers trailed down between her breasts. Pausing, though, she touched one nipple, drawing little circles around the already erect, dark pink bud. Grace could *hear* Abnur’s breath now. She’d never imagined he could be so consumed with this kind of hunger, but there was still much she didn’t know about him.

Her descent continued, down her ribs and stomach, pausing before stroking the inside of one thigh, parting them further, which pushed his knees apart too, as her feet still rested upon them. She’d been *ready* since he’d pulled her to sit on his lap and become increasingly so since then. With fingers meeting her slippery flesh, a shuddering breath escaped.

“For my gratification, or for yours?” She asked him. There was a difference, of course, what women did for show and what they did for themselves.

“Yours.” He scoffed. It made sense that Abnur would be more interested in seeing actual pleasure than just an act. A man so firmly rooted in fact would always prefer something real.

She laid down all the way, ignoring the cold marble against her back, and braced her heels against the lip of the table. Eyes closed, it wasn’t difficult to inch herself closer to what she wanted, knowing that Abnur sat there watching and that he would soon have her on this table. How long could he stand it before he needed to participate? Around and around her fingers went, moving her along; she could hear the sound of her breath echoing through the massive, empty chamber, and she was trying to keep from making any other sound. No need to alert any patrolling guards, or worse, Portney, who was waiting outside the chamber in the main corridor.

A quiet rustle of fabric told her Abnur had gotten to his feet, and she flinched as he pushed her thighs wide apart; she’d been *so* close. Grace looked up at him, pausing her self-ministrations, expecting that he’d decided to take part.

“Finish.” His eyes, bright as they were, looked dark with need, and she blinked but complied. She was on the edge, and she wanted to feel him, to feel the satisfying fullness and see his face, the way it twisted as pleasure took him. “Yes.” He breathed, encouraging her as her muscles tensed for relief. But then he decided to help, and slipped one finger inside her, eliciting a surprised noise, but tipping her over that edge. Clenching her teeth, she stifled any other sound that bubbled up, and in anticipation of the real thing, this small, preliminary climax waned quickly.

Abnur pulled his tunic out of the way and took her hand, putting it on him. She wrapped her fingers around him; he was hard, *very* hard. As he leaned forward, she guided him. He was braced on his hands, the tip sliding in just a bit, but he hesitated.

“What—” Her question was interrupted as he drove into her, and she couldn’t stop the startled cry that escaped. He leaned down and kissed her, not roughly as she might have expected, but deeply, and she held on, wrapping her legs around him. A dull ache had begun to throb at her tailbone, the beginning of a bruise. Other parts soon felt similarly, her shoulder blades, in particular, coming into repeated contact with the tabletop as Abnur moved. A wince flashed briefly on her face, and though she’d turned so he wouldn’t see, he did and grew still at once.

“The chair...” He murmured, as an alternative, and before she could formulate a response, he’d lifted her, stepped back, and sat down.

“This will do.” Grace kissed his mouth, moving her hips against him, feet braced on the floor. She

gripped the edges of the chair back for leverage, and he started breathing harder. Abnur groaned, and she found the perfect rhythm, the pressure was just right. Her head hung back, eyes closed as his hands moved over her skin, the tension inside her growing.

“Every time I sit here...this is what I’ll think of...” Abnur panted.

“I hope you’re better at hiding it from them than you are from me.”

There was only the sound of their labored breathing and soft moans, and then, at last, teetering on the precipice of completion, Grace fell headlong and willingly into it. The glorious spasm threaded itself through her body, then gripped her in its fist as she cried out. Abnur’s fingers were digging into her hips as he pulled her harder against him, driving up from beneath her, grunting with his effort. Still, she responded to him as she never had to anyone before, as if even the arcane which coursed through each of them mingled as they joined.

Even though her pleasure had swept her away, and the tide began to recede, she kept going, watching Abnur as he arrived at that delightful point of no return. It was the tiny window where everything he built around himself was stripped away, and he was all desire and need, clinging to her, moaning, until finally, his body tensed, hands clutching as he pressed as deep inside her as he could.

With closed eyes, he shuddered and groaned, which had become her favorite sound. The Undoing of Abnur Tharn, she called it. The tension left him, and his face relaxed, eyes opening to meet hers. He never said anything when he looked at her like that. Though, neither did she. The potential for some sentimental nonsense to fall from her mouth, at least, was far too great, and she wasn’t about to ruin everything with something as ridiculous as post-coital sappiness. Grace was fairly certain nothing said whilst in a pleasure-fueled daze could be trusted. Or perhaps it was the lust-fueled-blindness beforehand that couldn’t be trusted...it didn’t matter.

Abnur didn’t release her right away; instead, they sat, still joined, holding on to one another for a small eternity. But, without arousal and need driving them, the chamber had grown cold, and a shiver passed through her.

They’d been together a few times now, and this part, the part *afterward* always came with a certain amount of uncertainty, at least on Grace’s part. In bed, it was easy enough, Abnur would flop onto his back, or she would, depending on who was where, and they made whatever snarky remarks bubbled up as they either settled in to sleep or got ready to start the day. This was the first encounter since the very first time that they *weren’t* in bed.

“Well.” She whispered. “Not what I was anticipating before dinner.” His fingers trailed lightly to her abused shoulder blades, and she twitched ever so slightly.

“There will be bruises.” He murmured. She pulled back and smiled a little.

“I will survive. It’ll be with great amusement that I think of you sitting right here in your council meetings, remembering *this*.” She shivered though as he gave a smirk, arching one brow.

“You’d better get dressed.”

“Yes, yes.” She got up, and Abnur winced a little, but she quickly pulled on her dress, lacing it up and refastening the sleeves. Leaning once more on the table, her stockings were donned and then shoes, and it was as if nothing had happened. The only remaining evidence was Abnur’s chair, which was markedly askew. He didn’t fix it, and Grace grinned to herself.

Portney didn't look especially pleased from his place on the opposite side of the large corridor. Generally, she tried to keep from subjecting any of the staff to their activities. As she opened her mouth to speak, her thought was interrupted by the sound of running. Leather soles slapping desperately against the marble floor. She turned in time to see the burly guard grab a slighter, hooded form brusquely by the shoulders as the smaller individual gasped for breath.

"Let him go, Mr. Portney, it's just Hereic...what's the matter?" Grace stepped up, shoving back his hood as he dragged air into his lungs, mouth moving but coherent words yet to be uttered.

"I...your...the office...it's..."

"It's what?" Ice settled itself in her stomach.

"Totally ransacked." He panted, glancing nervously at Abnur, whose brow had knitted unpleasantly. "I'm sorry...milady..." Hereic shook his head. "I went back to grab one of the reference books, I was going to spend the night reading it..."

"Get your cohorts," Abnur ordered Portney. "I will go with her to the archives, meet us there." The guard gave a nod and departed to fetch Quint and Leo.

Grace was already briskly trudging down the hallway, whatever lingering bits of afterglow from the tabletop romp had vanished.

"Was anything destroyed?" Her heart was hammering, and she felt as if she might be sick. Hereic looked stricken.

"I don't know, I checked that there was no one in there, then ran to find you." He sighed. "Who would do such a thing, though? Do you think it was that Emedia woman being jealous?"

"I'd believed she was attempting to work her jealousy out in other ways. I'll break her fucking legs if she's destroyed my research."

"You'll do no such thing," Abnur growled. "You know better than to utter your threats *aloud*. It completely destroys any plausible deniability."

"I said *if*." Was this her life now? Just drifting from one bout of chaos to the next? Were the brief lulls filled with contentment and enjoyment really worth all this? Her other options weren't especially appealing either. Running home to Nibenay to hide simply wasn't in her nature, even if it *was* what her family would prefer.

The lock on the office door had not been tampered with, which meant that whoever had ransacked the office was in possession of keys, had sufficient skill in lock picking, or was a mage. As Grace pushed open the door, her heart sank. There were papers strewn across the floor, books piled at the foot of their shelves having been pulled out, and the faint smell of chemicals wafted toward them. Every drawer and cupboard had been emptied. Bottles of ingredients were knocked over, some had been dropped and shattered. Boxes of Dwemer components had been dumped. Her spider lay at the foot of its worktable, two legs broken off, the others bent, its precious dynamo core shattered, probably beneath the heel of a boot. Its volatile contents had burned partway through the floorboards and were emitting a noxious gas. Quickly, Abnur went to Grace's side and made a gesture over the spill, doing something that neutralized it. She wasn't paying attention and didn't care.

"Is anything missing?" He asked her.

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem so..."

“What about the books I brought back from Rkundzelt?” The concern on his face then was almost startling. In truth, those were probably three of the most valuable artifacts in all of Tamriel.

“If someone took those, then they would need to be a sorcerer of your skill level.” She glowered but went to the wall beside her desk to check anyway. Placing her palm against the cool plaster, several sigils appeared inside a much larger one, her hand at its center. They turned, like dials, some of the symbols changing altogether, and there was an audible click. Part of the wall seemed to vanish, revealing a small shelf with various books neatly lined up, including the Dwemer tomes and her journal. “Safe.” Grace murmured. The moment she stepped back from the wall, it resealed itself.

“Clever. Rotating sigil algorithm so that the combination doesn’t stay the same?” Abnur stared at the now normal-looking wall.

“Of course. Among other layers of protection.” On the one hand, it was nice hearing her security praised. But on the other, it felt as if a fist was around her heart squeezing it as she looked at the destruction. “I can’t even tell if they were looking for something or simply wanted to destroy my space.”

“It seems too haphazard to have been a search.” Abnur bent and picked up the ruined spider. There were memories attached to that little contraption.

There was a knock on the door before Portney stepped in, his eyes moving over the damage before landing back on Grace.

“I am sorry, milady.” His voice was gruff, brow furrowed.

“It isn’t your fault. I would have never expected anyone to do this.” She shook her head sadly, then went to the desk, scrounging for a sheaf of parchment and a pen. The inkpots were smashed, though, her small collection of fancy glass pens shattered as well. The drawers were empty; she couldn’t even find a pencil, and a sad, frustrated noise easily misconstrued to be a sob escaped her. Tears would neither help nor solve anything.

“Here,” Abnur muttered, a pencil materializing in his hand. Saying nothing, she took it and scribbled a note, which she then folded.

“Mr. Portney, could you please see to it that Avise gets this?” She held it out, and he took it.

“Milady, I would prefer not to myself...”

“Quint or Leo is fine, as long as someone trustworthy hands it to her. She may need to be escorted back if she doesn’t want to come alone.” Grace blinked back the stinging in her eyes. Portney took the note and stepped back outside the office. “I can’t feel any traces of magic, I don’t think it was a mage.”

“I agree. Everyone has a...flavor.” Abnur concurred. Hereic had already started picking up papers from the floor, sorting them into different piles.

“This is going to take all night to clean up. Sorry, but I don’t think I’m going to be up for dinner anyway.” She let out a long breath.

“Dinner can wait. Your collection of volatile substances needs containing, and I’m certainly not entrusting that task to this idiot.” Abnur gestured vaguely at Hereic.

“Thank you, chancellor. May I have another?” Hereic grumbled.

“What?” Abnur frowned.

“Nothing, milord.” The assistant cast him a glare before going to pick up more papers. Abnur, being uncharacteristically helpful, went to take care of her alchemy cupboard, and Grace slowly began cleaning up her desk.

Carefully, she put the remains of her glass pens into a small box, unwilling to throw them away. They’d been a gift from her father, Nevalo. What had she done to Emedia to have earned such ire? Was the woman truly *so* furious about not having use of that office that she would come in and destroy a person’s life’s work? Weren’t her attempts to seduce Abnur sufficient?

Grace was angry, of course. Furious. But the destruction of what she’d poured so much of herself into, brought sadness and disappointment that muted her rage. For now.

The door opened, followed by a shocked gasp from Avise who clapped both hands over her mouth then made her way to Grace.

“*What* happened?”

“I don’t know. But, if you’re willing, I’d like your help. You did so well with taking inventory of things...”

“Of course, yes. Just tell me what to do, and I will do it.”

“All the components have been dumped, anything breakable has been broken.” Grace sighed.

“We’ll get it all sorted out, and I’m sure the responsible party is going to have a very bad day.” Avise put a hand on her shoulder before heading to the work tables.

Once her melancholy retreated, whoever was responsible was likely to have more than a bad day. Especially if they happened to be the person she was already hunting for.

Oblivion Hath No Fury

25th of Frostfall

Sleep had not come, but Grace hadn't expected it to. A few minutes here and there she might have dozed but, for the most part, remained awake, staring at the canopy, getting angry. Abnur had no such issue, of course. The things that man did and then still slept soundly despite them, she shuddered to think. Had her own rooms not been torn apart for the work being done in them, she'd have slept alone. Or at least have stared at her own canopy.

The sun wasn't up yet, and neither was Abnur. Very carefully, clad in only a nightshirt, Grace slipped out of bed. Moving without making a sound, her eyes stayed fixed on her sleeping bedfellow the entire time, lest he wake and catch her. Once the door was safely closed behind her, she let out a long breath, then went to her rooms. They were torn apart, sheets draped over furniture, walls stripped of paper and paint, but the closet hadn't been touched yet, nor had it been emptied of her belongings. She felt a little strange about putting her things in Abnur's room, as though it overstepped some boundary. Whether that was her boundary or his, she didn't know.

During these weeks at the White-Gold Tower, she'd been playing a part, in a way. In a rare effort not to embarrass her grandfather and their family name, she'd donned dresses and did well enough at being a "lady". Grace's free time had always been spent up to her elbows in dirt.

At home, she was her mother's greatest mortification, traipsing about in trousers, hauling bags full of grimy artifacts and fragments of history. But no more would she play this part of a *lady*. She'd spent her youth and adolescence training as a battlemage, which was by no means a frilly affair with fine silks and fashionable garb. After that, she'd been a scholar, coming home covered in all matter of filth.

No, Gratiaren Tiradia was no lady and never had been. Abnur could either take her or leave her as he saw fit, though she didn't think he much cared what clothes she wore so long as she took them off from time to time.

Her favorite trousers were made of well-worn, slightly faded black, rugged material with various pockets, buckles, and places to put things. She'd mended them countless times, but they were more comfortable than any of her others. The shirt was fitted so it would fit easily beneath her jacket, which she donned but left open. Stockings and knee-high boots went on last and still tiptoeing, she made her way out. It didn't sound like the staff had even risen yet, and when Grace stepped outside into the hallway, Leo was leaning back against the wall, snoring softly. Why he was asleep when he'd gone on duty perhaps only an hour earlier, she couldn't guess.

"Wake up, you dolt." She hissed, giving his shoulder a shove. He jerked hard, blinking.

"Oh! Shit, milady, OH...my apologies...*shit*...I'm sorry, my language..."

"I couldn't possibly care less, shut up. Do you know how to do your job without all that plate?" She rapped a knuckle on one pauldron.

"Of course, I have had extensive training..."

"Good. You're of no use to me clanging around. Go get changed into leathers or whatever *isn't*

noisy and then meet me at my office.” Grace quickly glanced up and down the hallway, but there was no one.

“You’re going alone? The chancellor said...”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what the chancellor said, Leo. Are you protecting him or me? I think I’m the one you ought to listen to.” Her whispers were growing less whisper-like. Poor Leo looked very nervous, though.

“Milady, he is...a scary man, one I would rather not cross...”

“I’ve burned men alive, are you really worried I can’t protect myself?” She put her hands on her hips. He just stared, wide-eyed. “Go, get your leathers, and come to my office. I’ve left a note for Nalea to give Portney.” Still, he hesitated. “Go, Leo.” She growled, her eyes flashing. That was enough for him, and with a huff, he clattered away.

Grace let out a long breath, shaking her head, then started for the archives. Her office was only half organized since it had taken them two hours to locate all the inventory sheets and then three hours after that they’d spent going through the list one by one, finding each item, and putting them back where they belonged. She didn’t remember bringing quite so much with her, but it was what it was.

As she scanned through one of her older journals, hoping to find something that might shed some light on Emedia’s alleged snap to insanity, the door clicked open then gently shut again. Leather-clad, but no less anxious, Leo arrived, coming up to her desk where he sat in the chair across from it. His short, sandy hair went in every direction without being contained within a helm.

“I don’t understand what you’re doing with...all that.” He gestured toward her clothes.

“I’m done letting them treat me like a bloody porcelain doll. I’m a trained battlemage in all but name, Leo, and for fun there’s nothing I love more than digging through old ruins where I could very easily be killed and never heard from again.”

“Is...is that what we’re doing?” His face fell.

“No, of course not. There are bigger matters at hand, don’t worry. Not this time, anyway. What I’m currently doing is trying to find out why that narcissistic bitch, Emedia, has it out for me.” Grace exhaled in frustration and looked at the guard. She felt bad that people had been pulled into this farce, a thing she should have been able to deal with on her own. Though, really, the blame lay with Abnur and his inexplicable, twisted, over-protective streak that made no sense at all whatsoever and was never under any circumstances ever mentioned.

“So, the night you were attacked, when we found you...you think she had something to do with it?” Contrary to what most people believed about most guards, the ones who’d come to be in her employ were not stupid. Abnur wouldn’t suffer morons.

“I’m afraid that might be the case.” She looked back at the journal, scanning the page. “But it doesn’t really add up. She’s been a jealous person for the entirety of her life, I cannot for the life of me remember what thing I might have done to earn her hatred aside from being high-born. As if I had any choice about it.”

“She’s fairly popular among the other guards, and...”

“If you’re about to suggest what I think you’re about to suggest, you can just hold your tongue. Her sexual proclivities are not my business, nor are they *yours*. It’s completely irrelevant to anything to do with my situation.” Grace pinned him with a dangerous glare, daring him to say something

untoward, but he blinked, a little taken aback.

“No, milady. I didn’t mean that at all, I meant only that in passing, I’ve heard mention plenty of times how ambitious she is. Many seem to think she would do anything to achieve her ends.”

“Oh.” A little heat crept up her neck, and she cleared her throat. “Sorry.”

“I was sent to fetch you from a brothel that time, milady, one I’ve visited on many occasions myself, I’m in no position to judge the goings-on behind any closed door.” He chuckled.

“That was *you*?” She gaped.

“You don’t remember?”

“Well, I think I was too angry at Abnur to recall clearly...” Grace pursed her lips, then frowned just a bit. “Aren’t you married?”

“Yes, of course.” He grinned, then realized what she meant, and he grabbed the edge of the desk. “Oh! It isn’t like that at all, milady. Anya comes with me when I go, well, when *we* go. We always go together.” Leo was suddenly suffering from a bout of verbal diarrhea as he babbled an explanation Grace didn’t need or want, but she sat listening in curious silence. “It was her idea the first time, and I was dead set against it. I said she was all I wanted...well, then I was worried I wasn’t enough for *her*...” He took a deep breath and let it out. “But it all turned out very well. There’s this dark-haired girl there called Nell who she quite likes, and I was introduced to an Altmer fella...” All at once, Leo’s face turned puce.

“Ooh, Andian?” She asked without missing a beat. Relief washed over him.

“That’s the one.” He nodded, appearing to squirm just a little.

“He does outstanding work.” Grace gave an appreciative nod then quickly sobered. “Well. That got out of hand very quickly.”

“I thought the same thing the first night we went to the—” He stopped when she cast a level look at him. “Ahem. Right. Not relevant...apologies.”

The journals proved fruitless, the ones immediately accessible, anyway. There were still many more in Grace’s rooms at home in Nibenay. She didn’t enjoy conflict, or at least not this variety of it. A direct, face to face conversation with Emedia was what needed to happen, preferably *without* Abnur standing over her shoulder. Some things she just needed to do by herself. He would have no doubt insist upon his presence as a “safety measure” since he knew both her temper and her abilities. Two things she’d reined in tightly the last few weeks.

She should have been this angry from the moment the duke attacked her, but it was easier to be distracted, to keep her mind from it. It was easier, and it hurt less. Perhaps that time had been necessary though, the opportunity to shore up her strength and defenses, to feel like a whole person again rather than a damaged shell with all her weaknesses and flaws spilling out.

Instead, she’d allowed for *other* feelings to...happen, something she might not have done had the attack not taken place. She could be safely walled up and defended from anything, and everything had she not been introduced to *weakness*. Her fear that night had paralyzed even her power, and in the wake of that, she was unguarded. Things had gone too far, hadn’t they? Would silly affectionate notions weaken her further? Would it break her?

With a deep breath, Grace halted the downward spiral her mind threatened to tumble into. She was being ridiculous. Abnur hadn't made her *weak*, he'd allowed her the time she needed. And what had she done with that time? She'd used it to be magnificently fucked to within an inch of her life. It hadn't cost her any gold, at least, and there were worse ways to find one's bearings besides fulfilling illicit, adolescent fantasies. Well, they'd become her adult fantasies as well, *if* she was being honest with herself.

The door to the small, closet-like space that housed Emedia's "work", whatever that was, stood before Grace. To the right was an actual closet filled with buckets, brushes, and brooms. The wise, stealthy thing to do would have been to pick the lock or simply use a little spell. So, naturally, she kicked it in.

"*Milady!*" Came Leo's harsh, nervous whisper.

"Quiet. And keep watch like I told you." She rolled her eyes then stepped into the cramped space. It was unbelievably tempting to rip every book from the shelves and empty every drawer and break anything that would break. Fortunately for Emedia, Grace was a woman of science, and even as furious as she was about everything that had transpired, she would not act rashly without hard evidence. Also, she thought it might physically pain her to destroy books.

So, it was with great care that she began to invade the privacy of her nemesis, making certain to put each thing back precisely as it had been. There was a fair amount of research on magical and non-magical ways to manipulate people, which wasn't a surprise, but there was nothing of a nefarious nature. At least, until Grace found the hidden drawer. Everything inside was organized alphabetically, each one a dossier on various people. The duke was the first one she searched for, but there was nothing with his name on it. The section labeled *Tiradia, Gratiaren*, was suspiciously empty.

"*Milady...milady! Milady...*" Leo's urgency caught her attention. "I'm sorry..." He sighed as she stood, turning to find Decir in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Lady Tiradia, *what* are you doing?"

"What does it look like, Decir? I would think that working for Abnur would have gotten you out of the habit of asking stupid questions." She snapped at him. He sighed, biting back several remarks.

"Well, did you find something, at least?"

"No." Grace glowered. "She keeps secret files on people, which isn't very surprising. But there isn't one for the duke, and the contents of mine seem to be missing."

"What about the chancellor's?"

"Um..." She flipped through the files and found Abnur's pulling it up. There was less in it than she'd have expected. It was handwritten notes and observations mostly. "Ha. He will be delighted to find that he is indeed as inscrutable to the general public as he wishes them to think he is. Or she's just very, *very* stupid." She handed the file over, and he flipped through it, one side of his mouth quirking up in amusement.

"She's recounted things she's seen him eating, his schedule, and compiled a list of possible conversation topics."

"How could she believe he wouldn't see a contrived conversation from a mile away?" Grace rolled

her eyes and took back the file, replacing it in the drawer. It was possible, however, that parts of it were missing, like the entirety of her own file.

“What exactly is your intention?”

“I want to ask her about things myself, face to face.”

“And then what? Burn her alive?” He let out a long breath.

“So, Abnur told you about that, huh?”

“You can’t talk to her anyway, she left the city last night.”

“What?” Grace frowned. “That certainly seems incriminating. I’ve been overestimating her, all these stupid mistakes.” She shook her head. “I’ll go speak with Rasania Antel. Maybe she knows where the twat’s gone off to.” There was a choked laugh and then polite coughing and throat-clearing from the hallway. Leo hadn’t been around her all that much; usually, he worked the morning shifts, which she primarily spent in the archives, and it was Quint who was around for the latter part of the day.

“I assume you don’t know where Rasania’s offices are?” Decir smirked.

“Decir, won’t you *please* be *so* kind as to show me where her office is.” She affected an obnoxious, sweet tone.

“Why, *yes*, of course. Right this way.”

The moments that followed were relatively silent as the Senior Archivists had their offices on a much higher floor where daylight was allowed.

“How angry is Abnur?” She asked, finally.

“He didn’t seem very upset or surprised. I can’t imagine there is much you could do after the last however many decades that would surprise him.” The valet gave a little shrug.

“Oh, I’m certain there are some things.” She muttered. Which things, she wasn’t about to discuss with Decir, however.

Rasania’s door opened just as Grace lifted her hand to knock. The old woman looked a little exasperated, but that was because also standing in her office was Abnur. Her pale, almost lilac eyes took in Grace’s appearance.

“It’s about time you quit playing dress-up.” Rasania barked without preamble. “Good timing, I was just telling the chancellor to get out.”

“I wish I could say it was a pleasure speaking with you, Rasania.” Abnur looked less than pleased, and Grace would have done just about anything to have been a fly on the wall in *that* little meeting.

“Don’t lie, Tharn. Go on, get out. Take your *spy* and whoever that is with you. I’d like to speak with Lady Tiradia in private.”

Once the men had all been sufficiently shoved into the hallway and Grace dragged inside, Rasania slammed the door and let out a long breath.

“I suppose you’re looking for that shrieking harpy, too?” She sat down on the settee and gestured for Grace to join her.

“That’s why Abnur was here?” Grace sat in the adjacent armchair but took in her surroundings. The office was very spacious, its windows stretching from ceiling to floor so that even the winter sunlight poured in. The sleek furniture was crafted of white wood with jewel-bright green upholstery. On a table in front of one of the windows was another cushion, and on it, a black cat with long silky fur lay stretched out, taking in the warmth. The shelves were tall, and around the edges of them was a rail that a wheeled ladder could be pushed around on. Countless artifacts were displayed, some art...it was beautiful.

“Tea? No? Alright. And yes. He wouldn’t tell me the whole story, of course, because getting information out of Abnur Tharn is like getting blood from a stone.” Rasania poured her own tea, added a lump of sugar, and stirred. “So, are *you* going to tell me?”

“Almost three weeks ago, the Duke of Chorrol attacked me, urged by some unknown woman. Yesterday, we found my office completely torn apart, and this morning I learned Emedia, who I know hates me, left the city last night. Now, I don’t have any solid evidence yet, which is why I wanted to speak with her.” There was no point in hiding things from this woman. If Grace wanted powerful allies, she needed to trust. Or, at the very least, provide the illusion of trust.

“I thought the Duke of Chorrol was found mauled by wolves halfway between here and Colovia.” Rasania pursed her lips.

“Oh, is that so?” Grace didn’t even bother to attempt to rein in her glass face.

“Mmhm. That’s what I thought. Not a particularly catastrophic loss, that man was an idiot.” Rasania gave a shrug. “Well, with that nasty business out of the way, we can have a slightly less uncomfortable chat. I see you’re wearing your own clothes now, rather than whatever outfits were contrived for you by *other* people.”

“Ah, yes.” Grace looked down at herself. “I’m afraid I put about just as much energy as I could stand into appearing to be something I’m not.” She gave a small laugh. “Apparently, being Abnur’s mistress was easier to stomach than wearing trousers on a regular basis.”

“Typical Nibenese bullshit.” Rasania rolled her eyes. “Your grandfather should know better.”

“Yes, well, he...” Grace stopped, her eyes growing very round, words failing completely.

“I’m almost six-hundred years old, my dear, do you think I can’t tell a half-mer when I see one?” The old woman chuckled. “Oh yes, I’ve been in these archives since the last Reman.”

“And no one’s brought it up that one of the senior archivists has been here for almost six centuries?” It was a shocking revelation, and Grace was a little disappointed she couldn’t spot a half-mer as well as Rasania, who indeed looked like any ancient Imperial.

“Well, I’ve taken to looking quite old, though without a glamour, I look about as old as you do. I keep getting married and taking their names, and it seems to escape notice.”

“Very clever.” Grace wondered if she could have done the same and become a battlemage as she’d wanted. Archivists were hidden away, though, few really took the time to look at them.

“So, getting back to the important matter at hand, have you considered that perhaps you aren’t truly the target of these acts which have been taken against you?”

“I was attacked, *my* office was ransacked...it seems rather personal, does it not?”

“Yes, but these things didn’t happen until you started going out and about in public with Tharn... not that I can for the life of me figure out *why* you’d do a thing like that. Really, he is...”

“Yes, I know.” Grace sighed.

“That’s neither here nor there, though. You’re a scholar, and for as nasty and childish as Emedia is, even as much as she despises you, does it not seem strange?”

“It does. I spent all night thinking about how it didn’t make sense for even her to behave that way. Though it doesn’t make a lot of sense for someone to try to get to Abnur by hurting me. Whoever they are, they clearly don’t know him.” She laughed.

“He’s been very reactive to it all, wouldn’t you say? I see more of what goes on in this tower than many might think.” A sly smile crept across Rasania’s lips.

“Yes, but...” Grace stared for a long moment. “If he’s the target, it could be anyone. He has countless enemies; his own *family* members even. It also means that they won’t stop and that if they think getting to him through me is the way to go, then I *am* in as much danger as he tells me.”

Her face serious, Rasania sipped her tea. “For once, I agree with the bastard.”

Whiskey

25th of Frostfall

Abnur would never let her live down the realization that he was *right*, that she now believed his seemingly ridiculous and very annoying measures to ensure her safety weren't for naught. Grace ground her teeth a little as she sat at the desk in his study, penning a letter to her grandfather. Silero would be able to have all her past journals packed and sent to her, and he wouldn't ask a lot of questions. Any moment, though, Abnur was due to arrive. He'd spent the day with the emperor, which meant she could expect him to be in a foul mood. Perhaps he'd have some interesting political ridiculousness to complain about. That, at least, would be entertaining.

Her thought was to circumvent his ill-temper by giving him something to gloat about. Gloating was second only to outright insulting on Abnur's list of preferred interpersonal interactions. She would willingly admit to him her error in thinking his precautions unnecessary. It was a small price to pay to avoid an evening of sullen silence punctuated by furious muttering and the breaking of pens.

As though on cue, a slam echoed from the direction of the entryway, followed by the higher notes of Nalea's voice as she agreed to bring him dinner. His footsteps grew louder, and Grace signed her letter as he crossed the threshold of the study.

"Was the Reachman *especially* vexing today? Seems your hackles are certainly up." She didn't look at him yet, sealing the envelope. Something else was poking at her mind, though, a feeling as if there was something she'd forgotten.

"Do you *know* what he proposed?" Abnur uttered a disgusted noise, making a beeline for the liquor cabinet instead of his wine rack. That wasn't a good sign. The tumblers clanged noisily as he pulled them out, shaking his head. She saw a small white spark, and both glasses immediately got frosty.

"Well, I'm a mage, not a seer." Grace stood, leaving the letter on the edge of his desk; it would need to go out tomorrow.

Abnur speedily drained the amber-colored alcohol. "I spent the whole of the day attempting to distract and redirect him to *anything* but discussing legalizing the worship of daedra." Her eyes widened. *That* was not what she'd expected.

"Does he really have *no* idea how the people of Cyrodiil feel about things? They'd be less outraged if he suggested setting babies on fire for population control."

"If I thought it would change his mind, I'd even consider *that* suggestion." He refilled his glass, a bit twitchy as the vein on the side of his head stuck out.

"That's...unsettling."

"This is a Reachman we're trying to deal with, Grace, they're already back-woods barbarians. What was it you called him at that party?"

"Blood-drinking, cannibalistic savage?"

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Legalizing daedra worship would throw the whole of Cyrodiil into an uproar unlike any witnessed in a long, long time.” She’d never considered such a possibility, and clearly, neither had Abnur. Or rather, he hadn’t expected it so soon.

“It is precisely the uproar we need. Just...not yet.”

“I should think not.” She shook her head, mystified. “Nothing’s prepared, there’s no organization. The Reachmen have come out of the woodwork in droves, and they would slaughter any who rose up in opposition.”

“Precisely.” He sipped the drink, glancing at Grace before pouring a second one and handing it to her. Indeed, the tumbler was icy cold. Abnur picked up her sealed letter. “Silero?”

“I’m sending for the rest of my logbooks. I’ve already gone through the ones I have here and haven’t found anything useful regarding Emedia.”

“Yes, how *did* your little chat with Rasanía Antel go?” He sat down at the desk, waiting expectantly for the tale.

“Well,” Grace took a deep breath and let it out slowly before also taking a large swallow of what turned out to be a more potent whiskey than anticipated. It was with great effort that she held her breath until the urge to cough subsided. “You will be pleased to hear that I’ve come to think... perhaps the measures you’ve taken, such as insisting I stay *here*, assigning me my own guards, and the like...were actually prudent precautions.”

“I’d have thought you’d come to your senses well before now.” He scoffed. “How is it Rasanía convinced you when I could not? I knew you were stubborn, but...”

“Well, firstly, she *wasn’t* a smug twat about it.” Grace narrowed her eyes. “But she pointed out that while these acts of violence and vandalism targeted me, *my* ruin might not be the ultimate goal. It could be someone seeking to do *you* harm.”

“Obviously.” Abnur rolled his eyes. “However much your jealous nemesis despises you, it seems unlikely it would be worth the effort of what happened. With your avid aversion to and skillful avoidance of public life, did you *really* think it was about *you*?” His scathing tone rubbed her the wrong way.

“*Well*, it never occurred to me that if something were to happen to me, it would matter to *you*.” Saying it aloud made her stomach turn a little, but it was what she told herself; otherwise, she risked believing that Abnur might actually *care*.

“I see your opinion of me hasn’t much improved.” A small sneer flitted across Abnur’s face before he went back to his usual irritated and bored façade. He began flipping through the bundle of his own mail with jerky, impatient movements.

“Would you prefer that I had fanciful notions of love and devotion?” The words came out a little more icily than she intended; alas, one could not un-ring a bell. He got to his feet once more and stepped up close, pinning her with a steely glare.

“I suppose, then, that you are simply selling your body for access to the archives?” He knew right where to thrust the knife for maximum damage, he always had. This was not going as Grace had hoped, and her teeth clenched as she stared him in the eye. But Abnur Tharn could not simply inflict a wound, he had to *twist* the blade. “Not the means *and* the end, after all.”

She was stunned to momentary silence with the revelation that he'd apparently taken to heart the *stupid* thing she'd said to him one night. Or whatever version of *to heart* he was capable of. *Taken to the-void-where-emotions-go-to-die* didn't quite have the same ring.

He turned to walk away, and an infuriating note of inexplicable panic moved her to action.

"Abnur." She grabbed his arm, halting him. He looked back at her with one of the expressions that always made her want to slap him. The son of a bitch was all but forcing her to admit that their arrangement had gone beyond just being an arrangement. Had it *ever* been just an arrangement, though? "That isn't true. *Neither* of those things are true." How was she supposed to protect herself when he stripped away every defense? And would he always call her motives into question? Such behavior needed nipping in the bud.

"Aren't they, though?" *Bastard*. How in the bloody fuck had it come to this? Honestly.

"I will say this one time, and one time only, Abnur." Grace wasn't about to allow herself to be toyed with or browbeaten into always seeking to prove herself to anyone. It was satisfying to see the flicker of apprehension in his eyes. She knew very well what he was afraid she would say.

"Then say it." He set his drink aside and folded his arms. The stare he used when he wanted to be intimidating was completely ineffective on her.

"You said it yesterday that I never do anything that I don't want." Grace let go of him and set her own beverage aside. It really wasn't very smart to have these volatile discussions whilst using the good crystal. Already her glass had nearly slipped from her grip thanks to the frost forming on it. "I accepted your invitation to the city because I wanted to. I engage in conversations, debates, and even *arguments* with you...because I want to." She stepped forward, peering up into his face.

"Get to the poi—" Abnur stopped as she put her fingers over his lips. She wasn't finished.

"You're allowed to put your hands on me because I want you to. I touch you and kiss you because I want to." His arms dropped as he leaned down a little, fingertips trailing up her arms.

"I think I see where this is headed..."

"I share your *bed* because I *want* to."

"And here I thought it was because your bedroom is under construction." He looked rather pleased with himself, and it took a goodly amount of willpower for Grace to ignore the remark. Her mouth was close to his, the smooth fabric of the rust-colored tunic cool beneath her fingertips. Abnur's breath was coming a little faster as he brought her even closer. She let her lips brush his lightly.

"So...mock the sentiment, if you must, but..." His mouth interrupted her. Self-control slipped a little, and she reciprocated in earnest.

He put his hand behind her neck, the other arm around her waist as he pulled her more tightly against him. His tongue slid past her lips to stroke and meet with her own as she kissed him back. Whatever his feelings on *feelings*, it was clear that Abnur had assigned some importance to the fact that Grace's desire for him was not for some benefit, but only for himself.

"But?" He watched her with hooded eyes, that look in them, which was typically followed by a great shedding of clothes. She well and truly had his attention now and took two fistfuls of his hair, pulling back from the embrace.

"*But*...if you question my motives or otherwise continue to imply that I'm here for the sole

purpose of using you, I will leave you, Abnur, and I will not come back.” She *meant* it, and he was somewhat taken aback, but not angry.

Letting go, she moved away, and grabbed the nearest drink, draining it. It was probably his; oh well. She cleared her throat before resuming the conversation, which had been taking place *before* things had become serious and uncomfortable.

“I imagine that since you already assume that you’re the target, you have Decir casting a wider net in his investigation.” Grace fidgeted, plucking imaginary lint from her sleeve.

But Abnur stood there, just looking at her, seeming not to have heard the very clear and apparent return to a safe, appropriate topic of discussion. That did not bode well; if it took him time to think of something to say, it was going to be especially unpleasant, albeit likely creative. She girded herself for whatever contentious bullshit was brewing.

“It would matter.” For the *barest* of moments, a strange flicker of some unrecognizable expression appeared, immediately vanishing.

“What?” Grace blinked as she scrambled to make sense of it.

“If something were to happen.”

If something were to happen *to her*.

He took the opportunity whilst she stood there dumbstruck, to pluck the empty glass from her hand and bring it back to where the decanter sat uncorked. She processed, very slowly and very carefully, what he had just said, marking it as probably the only time she’d ever hear such a thing emerge from his cantankerous face hole. So, obviously, they would never speak of it again, which in all actuality, she was perfectly content with.

Abnur poured himself yet another drink, patiently waiting for the stupid look on her face to abate, and so she simply nodded. Message received. The fortitude for any other response simply didn’t exist.

Her fidgeting intensified with adjusting a buckle on her trousers. Topic change: attempt two. “So, Decir hasn’t come back with any promising leads?”

“Not as of yet.” Abnur resumed as though nothing had happened. Something that might frustrate others, but she was grateful for it.

“Rasania will be a useful ally, I hope. Unless you think *she* might want to destroy you.” Grace picked up the glass that *was* hers, swirling its contents.

“We aren’t friends, but there is no actual enmity. I do believe she is trustworthy. But be vigilant nevertheless.”

“Wow, heavy praise from Abnur Tharn.” Grace paused a moment. “She picked me out for what I am, you know.”

“Half-mer?” He looked smug. Was there *nothing* he didn’t already know? “She’s the only person who has been here longer than I have; I’ve suspected for the better part of a hundred years what she was.”

“I’ll have to ask her what you were like when you were younger.” She grinned suddenly as he arched a wry brow and shook his head.

“Don’t. You wouldn’t have liked me back then.”

“I barely like you *now*.” Feigning nonchalance, she sipped the now very cold whiskey, but the smirk he gave was satisfying.

“You’re not the first scholar forced to suffer my presence for the good of the research.” Abnur wandered behind the desk as she peered at him through narrowed eyes. “Not like that. Scholars are insufferable, I could never sleep with one.”

“What does that make me?”

“A battlemage dropout.” He shrugged and neatly dodged a flying chess piece.

“Anyway, I trust you managed to convince the Reachman *not* to behave so irresponsibly?” She needed to focus. Abnur made a frustrated noise, though, and rolled his eyes as he picked up another letter from his pile.

“For the time being.” He frowned as he broke the wax seal, though. The way he glanced up at Grace indicated that whatever was in the message, it pertained to her in some way.

“What?” *Dread.*

“You didn’t think to mention that you’d sent an invitation to Agrilius Philellian and...” He glanced back at the parchment. “...some nobody?” *Oh no.* Her face obviously reflected the sentiment as Abnur sighed. “Because you forgot about it.”

“I did...I was rather busy, you know.” She pursed her lips. Visitors would complicate matters, but she also needed the help with the Dwemer books.

“You have *two* assistants, yet neither one of them manages your schedule?”

“They’re archive assistants, not *personal* assistants.” Grace rubbed her face with a small groan.

“Do you require a personal assistant?” Abnur’s brows arched as he reached for a sheaf of parchment, as though to write the order that instant.

“No!” She pointed a finger at him for emphasis. “Before I came here, I had zero staff, and it was wonderful. Now I have assistants and guards and a lady’s maid and a fucking designer apparently...I don’t need *any* more.”

“Perhaps you do, if you cannot even...”

“No, Abnur.” She let out a long breath, not in the mood for a battle. “Why are *you* receiving notice of their impending arrival? Shouldn’t they have sent that to me?” A frown knit her brow.

“They did.”

“Abnur.” She snatched the parchment from him. “Is *everything* to do with me routed through you?” Grace put her hands on her hips, not even really surprised anymore by the liberties he took.

“I’ll save us both the argument. Yes, all mail, packages, messengers, visitors, and inquiries associated with you are first routed to me. No, I don’t read your mail...”

“You *just* did!” She held the letter up.

He ignored her. “Yes, it is going to remain this way. No, there is nothing you can do about it. If

slamming the door will make you feel better, get it over with, just don't break any more of the good crystal."

"I *feel* fine. Until this debacle is settled, it seems I must accept that no matter what, you're going to have your hands in just about everything." Grace rolled her eyes.

"See? Is that so hard? Imagine how easy everything up until now would have been if you'd just be more acquiescent." A sly smirk curled one side of his mouth upward as he came toward her. They might be pretending their little *exchange* hadn't happened, but his physical response to her had not abated. For the moment, she lacked the willpower to argue.

"If I had ever been unconditionally compliant at any point, you'd have gotten bored with me decades ago." Grace folded her arms.

"I suppose that's probably true." He snaked one arm around her waist as she made a token effort to resist.

"No one who spends their life saying *yes sir* and *no sir* and never thinking about themselves was ever very interesting." Then she stood up on her toes just a little and took his earlobe between her teeth. Abnur gripped her backside with both hands, and she sucked gently, feeling the shudder that went through him. She'd discovered *that* spot a couple days earlier.

"I don't know, perhaps you should try it." His breath caught as she pressed against him, her lips moving to kiss his neck. It was beyond titillating at the way he seemed to forget himself when she did things like this. Abnur Tharn, a pillar of pragmatism and self-control, with his sharp wit and a tongue that was sharper still...undone by her touch.

"Have you always been this way, Abnur?" She asked, running her tongue over his skin, her teeth grazing him until he shivered. He was trying so very hard not to react so readily.

"What way is that?" He exhaled the words, pulling her against him, and she could feel him even more now.

"So easily distracted by physical pleasure." The wicked grin Grace wore was hidden as she continued her torment. Reaching between them, she found him, slowly stroking over the fabric of his tunic.

"*No*. Never. The phenomenon is...very disconcerting." Abnur began feeling about for a buckle or lacing, whatever would get her pants undone. "Though, it may in fact *not* be all that distracting; you've never attempted to *seduce* me in the midst of essential business."

"I could try." She tucked the idea away for a rainy day.

"Don't."

"Why not? You don't think it will work?" She did pull back then, looking him in the eye.

"I think it might, which is precisely the problem." He kissed her but moaned when she slid her hand beneath the tunic, wrapping her fingers around him. Still, he was having little luck with getting into her trousers and made a frustrated noise. "Where in the bloody fuck are the fastenings to these infernal leggings?" He muttered. Taking a half step back to look at the front of them, he was freed from her grasp. Grace gaped in mock astonishment.

"Such *language*, chancellor."

“You’re not planning to dress like this all the time, are you?” He complained but found the laces at last. “I’m not sure the aesthetic makes up for the inconvenience of them.”

“You’d rather I just had skirts to toss up?” She smirked, batting his hands away from the ties, which were also proving too tricky at the moment for his sex-addled brain and impatient fingers.

“If you were *appropriately* dressed, this would be well underway by now.” Abnur shot her a less than amused look.

“Well, since it seems you’re unable to get under my clothes, we’ll have to make do with what’s available.”

“I suppose your hands are better than nothing, and I’ll cut the bloody clothing off you tonight if I have to...” There was a slight air of disappointment about him, but Grace’s brows arched as her intention seemed to have gone right over his head.

“Wow, you have been deprived far more than even I thought.” She laughed, then nodded to the settee. “Sit down...*sir*.” He gestured toward the study door, and it shut with a bang. Biting back some remark, he did as he was told.

As Grace stepped around the sofa, and knelt at his feet, understanding and then eager anticipation flashed briefly across Abnur’s face. She hadn’t done this properly to completion for him yet. She’d expected he would ask her to, but he never did, and seemed, so far, content with their other means of being satisfied.

She’d met many women, usually drinking in taverns while on various excursions, who’d claimed to hate doing it for one reason or another. For her, though, it depended on the person she was doing it to. Some she’d been willing, others not. For Abnur, though, she’d probably do anything.

His eyes were intent as he stared down at her, watching as she pushed the tunic up and lifted it, freeing him. Nudging his legs a bit farther apart, she brushed her lips lightly against the inside of one, her breath hot. There was the slightest tremble in him as her hands moved up and down his thighs. It was fascinating to watch his reactions when she teased him, touching everything but what he wanted most.

The sound he made when her lips found his soft parts was one he’d never made before. Gently she sucked and massaged, his breath coming fast and ragged. Grace wasn’t cruel, though, and fully intended to follow through. She met his gaze, which, in itself, was startlingly erotic, then slowly, her tongue ran up the underside of him, base to head. When at last she slid her lips down over the tip, his mouth opened, eyes rolling back a little.

She moved with slow, deliberate strokes, and Abnur’s hands found their way into her hair. Her tongue played over his rigid flesh, and she alternated speed and pressure, listening to the sound of his breath, the noises he tried to stifle, the way his muscles tensed, and how his hips moved. The more she took her time, the better it would be for him, which was something else they’d established in their other activities.

He was breathing hard as she found the right rhythm, with the periodic upward thrust as he groaned through clenched teeth. He was getting closer.

The study door opened, and for a moment, Grace froze. She’d forgotten entirely about Nalea. Abnur didn’t seem very much to care; this was his study; he’d do as he pleased. The back of the sofa faced the desk and the doorway, fortunately. What was going on was disguised by that fact. He might not care, but Grace was not particularly keen on being observed in such a position.

“I’ve left the tray at the sidebar,” Nalea announced. Overcome by a burst of impishness, Grace resumed pace as every muscle in Abnur’s body tensed. He’d expected her to remain still. “Will there be anything else, chancellor?”

“N-no.” His teeth were clenched.

“I brought two settings in case Lady Tiradia returns.” Nalea must have thought the slamming door was an angry exit rather than for privacy.

“Fine.” Abnur was almost shaking, and when the door finally shut, he looked down at Grace, his chest heaving. “You...” He seemed to be at a loss for words. She paused, feigning innocence.

“Shall I stop?”

“Don’t you dare.” With eyes closed briefly, his head lolled back as she took him into her mouth again, moving in tandem with one hand wrapped around the base as the other gently massaged his soft parts. She looked up at his glazed eyes, the flush of arousal had crept up his neck, and his face was a bit red.

Then he said her name. Why it surprised her, she didn’t know. He hadn’t said it during their other encounters, and he didn’t say it all that often under normal, fully clothed circumstances. But, wasn’t every man on the cusp of completion liable to utter nonsense in the heat of the moment? Grace pushed the thoughts away, this was no time for analysis.

“I’m close...” He panted, and she felt him swell a little, getting even harder, and he tried to say something else but moaned instead. She hummed her assent, and he urged her to go faster, so she did. His hips jerked, and he let out a long groan of pleasure, completely at her mercy as he buried himself as far into her mouth as she let him. She held still, feeling each pulse, her tongue yet undulating against his cock as she swallowed. A tremble shook him when it was over, and he winced as she carefully disengaged.

“There.” She whispered. He was breathing hard still and looked almost shaken, a sheen of sweat on his brow. Grace grabbed what was left of his drink from the end table and finished it, sitting beside him. His taste could have been worse, he ate a lot of fruit. “You know...” She was cut off as he grabbed her, pulled her close, and kissed her. The tumbler was knocked from her hand and shattered as it hit the floor, but she put her arms around his neck. Some men were strange about kissing after a thing like that. “What...what are you...?” He eased up, and she felt a little dizzy. It was all too much, but she hungered for this...whatever the fuck it was. His forehead was pressed to hers. “Um, the crystal...”

“Doesn’t matter.” He didn’t move or release her, and for a very brief moment, she wondered if he’d gone to sleep. It would be fairly typical, if so. Finally, though, he spoke. “There’s food, apparently. Are you hungry?”

“For what?” She grinned.

“For *dinner*. I’m...I’m going to need a minute...after...*that*.”

Save The Dwemer

27th of Frostfall

An entire day and a half managed to pass without incident, which was a rare occurrence anymore. Late Morndas morning saw to the end of that. Tharn's appointment arrived, fortunately on time, unlike the previous one. It was with Baron Morus Gallucia, who ran an acquisition and reclamation operation. The appointment notes said only that it was a proposal the baron sought to have deliberated at the upcoming public Elder Council session, which was at the end of the week.

"Good morning, chancellor. I want to express my gratitude for you taking the time out of your busy schedule to see me." Gallucia was a slimy sort of man. Business and his own personal wealth came before everything else, and he'd never much cared one way or another who was stepped on in the process. Ordinarily, such practices wouldn't make Tharn blink an eye, but this individual thought of himself even over the Empire. Their own people had suffered because of him. Tharn had unapologetically caused a great deal of strife on various occasions because it was all for the benefit of furthering the Empire.

"I didn't take time out of my schedule, Baron. You were *on* the schedule. I have other upcoming meetings that I care about a great deal more than this one, so do make it quick." Tharn sighed. These proposals were tedious. They were practically pointless, little more than formality.

Grace was in the adjoining file room, miraculously quiet for a change, but could hear everything *if* she was even listening. It wouldn't matter so long as nothing alerted anyone to her presence. She dug through his old records regarding research and excursions into Dwemer facilities by any of the archival staff, past and present. He hadn't asked why; it was just easier to let her do what she wanted since she'd find a way to do it with or without his assent.

"The proposal is this, chancellor: my company seeks both permission and support to enter dwarven ruins and deconstruct them entirely for the use of and eventually sale of the incredibly valuable metals therein." The baron, a heavyset man prone to decadence, puffed his chest up as though he'd just suggested the most wonderful idea to ever grace Tharn's ears. Of course, *this* proposition would come to him, on *this* of all days as the most Dwemer-obsessed person he'd ever known was currently rifling through his things well within earshot. Fantastic, and it *had* started off as a more tolerable day than usual.

"What makes you think the Empire would sanction such a thing? There would need to be an excellent reason for us to stick our necks out when most, if not all, Dwemer facilities are outside the secure borders of Cyrodiil." Tharn folded his hands, noting that it seemed *too* quiet now. Nothing good ever came from silence where Grace was concerned.

"The acquisition of such metals would be of *great* benefit to the Empire, Chancellor Tharn. Armor, weapons...in exchange for support, we would, of course, apply a substantial discount on all materials reclaimed from the ruins." There was some other angle being worked, that much was certain. Tharn didn't know or care what it was, though. If he invested himself or his attention in every low-life with a lousy idea that walked into his office, he'd never get anything important done.

It would be easy enough to put an end to this particular petition immediately. All that was needed was to deny the proposal, which would undoubtedly serve to maintain the harmony between Tharn

and the luscious menace he'd crawled into bed with. Literally and figuratively. But a rejection would allow for an appeal, and the whole request would be brought forward again in six months' time. If it was voted down instead, it could never be proposed again. Grace would simply have to understand that fact in a few minutes when she'd emerge and demand to know what in the fuck he was thinking approving such a thing, and how dare he, and so on and so forth.

"You'd best be prepared to be *thoroughly* examined, Baron, before it's put to the vote." He sighed. "I'll have it added to the docket. You will be contacted within the next day with the time of your hearing."

"Thank you, my lord. You will not regret it." Gallucia swept into a deep bow, looking very pleased with himself. Despite being a smug and self-absorbed person, Tharn hated such traits in men like this.

"Oh, I'm sure I will regret it a great deal. You may go." He gave a dismissive wave, then stared at the door as it closed. The instant the latch clicked, there was a frantic scrambling noise as something fell in the back room, followed by irritated cursing and shuffling about. Finally, Grace emerged, looking every bit as furious as he knew she would.

"He wants to *strip down* Dwemer ruins?" She shook her head, apparently having never heard anything so preposterous in her life. Tharn decided not to mention that it wasn't the first time in history anyone had made such a suggestion. Nor would he reveal that on occasion, the requests were actually granted, though usually ending in disaster. "And you just *approved* it to go to vote? I fail to see how such an endeavor would benefit you." Inwardly, he bid farewell to the near-constant sexual romps they'd been enjoying.

"This might come as a shock, but despite your appalling summation of my motives...in matters of state, the good of the Empire comes before *all* things. Before me, before family, and certainly before you."

"I'm well aware of the hierarchy your priorities follow, Abnur." Grace folded her arms, rolling her eyes.

"If I turned the proposal down, in a few months, he'd be back here making it again, and each time with something else to try and sweeten the deal." He looked down at the documents the baron had left. "Even if it passed, which I doubt it would, what do you think the result would be? That they'd successfully dismantle an entire ruin or that the automatons would tear them to shreds?"

"Not *every* single ruin is still guarded by automatons, Abnur. If they've identified which lay unprotected, they very well could succeed." She ran her hands back over her hair.

"You're fretting as if he's guaranteed to be approved. He must present his case, and...well, there is opposition allowed." A sudden stroke of brilliance presented itself to Tharn. "If *you* feel so strongly, why not deliver the argument against the proposal yourself?" The words, they'd poured forth before the rest of him had even weighed all the possible repercussions of the thing. Not consequences that would affect anyone but him, of course, but he mattered more to himself than anything else did. Damn it.

"What?" Her already large eyes grew wider still, the wheels turning. *Damn it!*

Tharn let out a long breath. "Yes. It's not unlike a court of law. Well, it *is* a court of law, just not criminal. It doesn't matter, my point is that the vote is the judgement and the general format is an argument for and an argument against the proposal. Most are presented unopposed, which doesn't necessarily ensure being voted yes, but..."

“When is the public session?” She put her hands on his desk, leaning down, getting that overzealous, crazed sort of look that sometimes happened when she’d become particularly dedicated to something.

“Fredas.”

“Not much time, then. I’d best make the most of it.” She pursed her lips, standing up straight. Only this woman could look diabolical whilst thinking about *research*. “Oh, and I’ve made a bit of a mess. Things weren’t stacked very well back there, I can have Hereic come...”

“No, I’ll have one of the aides do it.” Tharn rolled his eyes. “I don’t need the boy coming up here to soil himself if he hears me breathe too loudly.”

It was incredibly advantageous that Aggy and Tal were due to arrive in just one day. Their assistance with compiling all the evidence Grace would need for her case against the baron’s ridiculous proposal would be *most* welcome. How many scholars could be gathered and brought to the palace before Fredas? There were quite a few at the Arcane University she had corresponded with on a few occasions who would no doubt attest to the dangerous nature of Dwemer technology and magic. It would be even better if she could find one with burn scars or some other visible maim.

Leo practically had to scurry to keep up with Grace as she made her way from the chancellery to the archives. He was puffing just a little bit as he took up his post outside the office as she burst in. She halted, though. There, perched on the corner of her desk, was a sleek, long-haired black cat, watching her with bright, yellow eyes. She’d seen that cat before; it was Rasania’s. It seemed to have the run of the entire palace because Grace definitely remembered seeing the creature in other places during her comings and goings.

“Well, hello there.” Its eyes followed her as she crossed to the desk, going to her chair, but she didn’t sit. “How did you get in here?” She reached out to scratch its ears.

“No petting.” The cat *said*.

“Fucking hell!” Grace jerked backward, falling over her chair, and hit the floor hard, but luckily not with her head. She lay there for a moment, though, backside and shoulders throbbing and exhaled a long breath. “My apologies.” She called up. “Very sorry...I didn’t realize you were Alfiq.”

“Yes, this one knows.” Large black ears followed by the yellow orbs appeared over the edge of the desk, merriment alight in them. “No offense was taken; this one enjoys giving a good scare now and then.”

“Oh, so you’re a *funny* Alfiq.” Grace sighed.

“Just a tiny bit sadistic as well, probably. This one would help you up, but...”

“Yes, yes.” She groaned, pushing herself up and finally clambering back to her feet. “I assume I need no introduction, considering your association with Rasania, but, may I have your name?”

“Of course, of course.” The Alfiq waved a paw. “This one is called J’ravi. Though, when out and about, Rasania calls her *Whiskers*. Not particularly creative, but it fits well with her ruse of playing an old woman.”

“Well, lovely to meet you, J’ravi, but you’ve come on a day that I have very little time to spare. I have a lot of preparation as well as digging to do before the end of the week.” Grace sat in her chair, trying to think what exactly to start on first.

“Rasania said you are a person worthy of J’ravi’s assistance. If there is something you require knowledge on, this one can find it.” There was a promising note of confidence in J’ravi’s voice, but then Grace had watched a very confident Khajiit fall off a building once.

“This doesn’t pertain to whoever was behind the *incidents* you’re no doubt aware of. Some idiot of a man wants to invade and rip apart Dwemer ruins for monetary gain, and I must defend against it.”

“Why not simply have the idiot of a man killed? Problem solved.”

“That’s disturbingly tempting, believe me, but alas, not an option.”

“The situation matters not, J’ravi can help in any case. It does seem like a cause Rasania would approve of. Just tell this one what you wish to do, and she will see to it you acquire what you seek.” J’ravi gave a toothy, maybe slightly demented smile. Grace nodded, ideas already bubbling up. “Though it is advisable you also enlist the assistance of the Tharn’s *slippery* valet. This one has worked with him before; he is useful for the tasks that require...thumbs. And not unlike this one, he blends in very well because no one suspects that he is more than he seems.”

“Very well, but Abnur can’t get wind of it. I won’t have my efforts discredited because of...the level of association he and I have.” She would need to be very careful. There was no telling what a man like Morus Gallucia would do to get his way. Measures would need to be taken, preferably within the confines of legality. She wasn’t sure anymore, though, if she trusted herself not to go farther if necessary.

Grace scribbled fervently as she recounted the day in her logbook. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, and it was getting to be almost midnight. Abnur hadn’t come back for the night yet either, which was fine considering how late it was when she returned. Much of the necessary groundwork for the argument was laid, waiting only to have facts and logical reasoning piled on, supported with copious evidence.

“You’re still up.” Abnur startled her; he moved like a gods damned wraith sometimes. She hadn’t even heard the door. It seemed excessive, even for him, to have portaled from his office to the bedroom, not to mention she’d have felt that.

“Yes.” Grace snapped the book closed, then both it and the pen were gone with a tiny pop, safely away to the vault. “Why? Are you disappointed?”

“What are you, an adolescent? Don’t fish.” He scoffed, disappearing into the adjoining dressing room.

“I wasn’t *fishing* for anything. It’s alright to be too *tired*, I’m perfectly content to just go to sleep. I know it’s late.” She grinned maniacally and bit her lower lip, imagining just how aggressively he was rolling his eyes. She hadn’t been waiting up for him by any means, it just happened to look that way, unfortunately.

“You know, when I slept alone, my valet used to be here to assist with dressing and undressing and getting things ready.” He called from where he was no doubt donning his nightshirt. Really, he

ought to have just left it off since it never stayed on anyhow. Grace moved to his side of the bed, hanging her legs over the edge.

“Well, as soon as Tievus is finished with his remodeling, I will be sure to sleep there instead of disrupting your routine with all the terribly inconvenient sex. That way, it can be just the way you like it, and I will lie there every night with bated breath in case you decide to come service me.” The thought made her a little angrier than she expected and muttered half under her breath, “Like a bloody fucking broodmare.”

Abnur emerged, arching a brow at her dour expression, but his gaze flitted over the rest of her where her nightgown slipped down over one shoulder, and the edge of it was up above her knees. Casually, he strode over to stand in front of her.

“Broodmares are for breeding. So, it doesn’t really fit, does it?” His hearing was unbelievable, and her frown deepened.

“Well, *whore* certainly isn’t suitable either then.”

“Of course not, you’re *saving* me an exorbitant amount of gold.” Abnur stepped between her knees, pushing the nightshirt up a bit more, and his touch trailed lightly over her skin.

“I’d wager you’ve saved me more.” Grace stared him in the eye as he leaned closer.

“I’m sure. Since coming here, you visited the local establishment at least twice that I know of.” Before she could formulate a scathing reply, his deft fingers moved up her thigh, and he slipped two inside her. He skillfully got to work as she inhaled sharply, clutching the blanket in her fists. She’d looked at his hands for years, wondering as well as imagining precisely this. “How is your argument coming along?”

“Why do you do that?” She squirmed as his thumb found her.

“Do what?”

“Touch me and then talk about...work...”

“It amuses me.” He kissed her lips but only very briefly. “Well?”

“Are you not...*hnng*...part of the vote?” She panted.

“I am.”

“Then, I can’t tell you.” Her legs were trembling a little, and he paused briefly. At once, Grace grew concerned that he’d use his *talents* to attempt to coax it from her. Teasing was all well and good, but if he’d cheapen their pleasure by using it as a tool to extract information, there would be trouble.

“They’ll assume I’m informed anyway, but if that’s how you want to do it...” Abnur shrugged and didn’t stop. Relieved, she reached for him, but he grabbed her hand. “No.” It seemed a stern denial, but she complied. “And with your visitors arriving tomorrow, you’ll have plenty of help. What do you think...” She closed her legs on his hand, halting all movement.

“I’m *not* talking about them while you’re doing *that*.”

“Why not?” His eyes narrowed. The entire mood had shifted immediately. “Is there something I should know?”

"I'm sure you already know everything there *is* to know." Grace sighed, taking him by the wrist and pulling away. Only a complete moron would think that Abnur hadn't immediately sent Decir to find out *everything* about Talaray Torlun, especially what had gone on between her and him over the years.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, you ridiculous man-child." She huffed, irritated that his absurd notion of possession had put the kibosh on a potentially delightful night. Why couldn't he just leave well enough alone? Amidst her amusement at the prospect of a flustered, jealous Abnur, she'd somehow overlooked what a nightmare he would be if he so chose. One look at Talaray was all it would take.

"Man-child?" He made an indignant noise.

"Yes, that's what you are if you're going to be jealous of something done and over with."

"You think I'm *jealous*?"

"I think you're a nosey, self-centered, prickly bastard who will punish me for something that went on before..." She halted. Before what? This? Whatever this catastrophe was. "Before it mattered." Making her way back to her side of the bed, Grace pulled the covers back and fluffed her pillow. Abnur let out a heavy, exasperated sigh, turning down the blanket on his side. This *wasn't* how she'd hoped the night would end. What now? Sulking in silence? It wouldn't make for restful sleep; that much was for sure. But he'd just have to suck it up, put on his big boy tunic, and play nice lest he find this side of the bed cold and empty again.

Visitors

28th of Frostfall

The idea that the Empire would contribute *any* resources to an operation that didn't guarantee a substantial payout was ridiculous. Scrap metal, even Dwemer scrap metal, wasn't a very tempting offer, especially without the highly skilled blacksmithing required for it to be anything *more* than scrap. Grace had been allowed to visit the Earth Forge once and had seen with her own eyes what it took to truly manipulate such metals. It seemed doubtful anyone in the baron's employ would possess the talent.

She couldn't bank on suppositions alone to make her case, however. This was an opportunity for her to accomplish multiple things. She could get Baron Shit-For-Brains' proposal thrown out, of course, as well as bring awareness to the importance of proper research and exploration into the ruins. With better funding and trained professionals, more progress could be made toward technological advancements that would actually be beneficial to the realm.

"I have *SO* many questions for Agrilius Philellian." Hereic's jittering excitement pulled Grace from her thoughts. He'd been practically bouncing off the walls all morning. "I have read all his theses on translation and if he'd be even willing to glance at my notes..."

"I'm sure he will, Hereic." She smiled, shaking her head.

"Why aren't *you* a mess?" Avise tipped back in the chair on the other side of the desk, one foot up on the edge.

"Generally, as a rule, I try to avoid being a *mess*, it's not very professional. Besides, why would I be? I've known Aggy for years, I'm certainly not going to get *that* excited to see him." Grace laughed.

"No, I mean with the upcoming argument on top of the investigation on top of...*things*. Or is it *things* that have you so calm?" Avise waggled her eyebrows.

"*Things* are a situation that I *don't* want to think about for the moment."

"What do you mean? I've been *eagerly* awaiting an announcement that you're to be Number Eight." She was kidding. Hopefully. The Healers Guild agreed with Avise so far. Even inside of the two weeks of her attendance, there seemed a newfound confidence about her. It suited her far better than the archives had.

"Frankly, I'd rather be fucked dry in the ass by a poxy Cathay-raht than get married." Grace grinned at the brief scandalized look on Avise's face.

"But why Cathay-raht?"

"Spines," Hereic answered, looking a little disturbed.

"Spines?" Avise frowned, then gasped, understanding. "*OH*. That's a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"I believe it makes my thoughts on the matter fairly clear."

"I cannot tell you the number of conversations I wish I had never heard the two of you have." Hereic sighed heavily, turning a page in his notebook. "Do you think Agrilius Philellian will mind very much if I ask him to take a quick glance at some things besides my notes? I have other projects as well..."

"I'm sure he won't mind; he's always been happy to foster the interest of young minds in his field of research." Grace glanced at the clock again; there was little worse than waiting for people to arrive. She'd sent Quint to the main entrance so he could bring them right down to the archives with the hope that they might not be subjected to Abnur beforehand.

It was still somewhat unclear if he'd set aside his pettiness. He hadn't seemed terribly bothered by things that morning when he reached for her, and she'd gladly obliged. As always, he made her body sing. The way he touched her was mind-bogglingly contrary to everything else about him, and no doubt were she to ever dare utter that Abnur Tharn was a considerate and even passionate lover, no one would believe her. But as she had no intention of ever saying any such thing to anyone, it didn't much matter.

They hadn't discussed anything much, but they'd lain together a while afterward, long enough that he was ready for another go. With her inexplicable inability to resist his advances, they were both late to their morning obligations. Despite her satisfaction, thinking about it still roused her desire for more. It took some effort to push it out of mind.

Hereic's nervous musings went on. "How long do you think Agrilius Philellian took to..."

"Hereic, you *can* call him Aggy." Grace narrowed her eyes.

"But that seems presumptuous, just to call him that straight off, doesn't it?"

"Fine, then he can tell you himself."

The office itself was back in order, at least. Some things had been broken, but nothing had been taken. It would take some time, though, to replenish the alchemical cabinet. The reagents Abnur had used to create the spider's dynamo core had been destroyed, and so the poor, battered little construct still lay inert on one of the worktables.

Footsteps approached the door.

"Finally." Grace let out a long breath and got to her feet, brushing off her trousers. Propriety be damned, she was done flitting about in a dress and playing at nobility. She pulled open the door, and rather than her guests, Decir stood, looking the tiniest bit apologetic. "Where are they?"

"Chancellor Tharn requests your presence in his office at the chancellery." It sounded very formal, and he arched a brow at her.

"Great." She muttered, closing the door behind her. "I suppose he's waylaid my guests?" Decir said nothing but cast her a glance that told her plenty. "Have you spoken with J'ravi?"

"Yes, milady. It hasn't been difficult to acquire copies of the records you asked for already. In this case, your opposition has employed individuals who have gotten lazy with a lack of proper supervision and the baron's...excessive hubris."

"Well, that's not very surprising, all things considered. If the man is so cocksure that he can simply stroll into a Dwemer ruin and take with impunity, he can't be very wise."

"And you're sure you don't want the chancellor's assistance with this?" Decir looked perhaps a

little concerned, but Grace shook her head.

“No, I can’t risk any grievances being lodged against the council for unfair bias. I haven’t even told Abnur what I’m doing yet.” A sly grin slid across her lips. “I think he will find it interesting, though, so I hope you don’t feel too badly about keeping it from him.”

“Milady, the chancellor is not privy to every single one of my thoughts and deeds.” He chuckled as they turned toward the chancellery.

“Any word on Emedia?”

“She seems to have departed Cyrodiil with some lord or another, or so I’m told. I haven’t got all the details yet. Her children have been left in the care of her housekeeper, though.”

“She has *children*?”

“Two of them, under the age of eight.”

“I feel sorry for them if she behaves toward them as she does everyone else.”

Abnur’s office door was open, the sounds of familiar voices coming out as she approached. He had indeed commandeered her guests, and outside the door stood Quint, looking abashed.

“Traitor. *What* happened?” Her whisper was harsh. He let out a long breath, shaking his head.

“I waited where you said to, and when I saw them coming, I thought I was in the clear. But the valet showed up, thanked me for personally escorting the guests, and led us all here under orders from the chancellor. I wasn’t exactly in a position to argue.”

“Typical. Well, it is what it is.” Rolling her eyes, Grace stepped into the office where the sight she met was both very unexpected and incredibly disconcerting. It *appeared* Abnur was conversing amiably with both Aggy and Tal. The former, upon seeing Abnur look her way, whipped around, nearly spilling his glass of wine. Aggy blinked at her through his thick spectacles. They magnified his beady eyes to be twice their normal size.

“Oh! At last!” He emitted an excited sort of hoot and wobbled his squat, spherical figure off the sofa to greet her. “It has been *TOO LONG*, Gratiaren! How dare you wait so long to send for me?!” The short man couldn’t contain himself, though, and gave a ridiculous sort of giggle, trotting over to grasp her in a hug.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry, Aggy. It’s been a busy month, just one thing after another. Rest assured, it won’t happen again.” She grinned, as he released her then, quickly giving her jacket a tug as though to straighten it.

“Ah, I’m too excitable, my apologies, my dear. Tal is always telling me to take a deep breath, but when I caught wind of all *this* at your disposal, and then your invitation...” He shook his head as though rendered speechless by the enormity of it all.

“Well, I haven’t invited anyone else, if that makes you feel better.”

“It does, thankyouverymuch.” He pulled himself up to his full, not very impressive height, and pushed his glasses up his nose, maintaining a straight face for all of two seconds before the grin was plastered on again.

Abnur stuck a glass of wine in her hand, and she stared at him in disbelief, silently questioning just *what* the hell was he doing? Understanding her face well, he gave a little shrug, barely concealing a smirk as he took a drink.

Grace schooled her face, then turned to say hello to her *other* guest. He was, as always, a living, breathing piece of artwork. He was a bit taller than Abnur and was the opposite of him in just about every conceivable way. Talaray Torlun was beautiful. Even calling him handsome didn't encompass the visual delight that he was. Warm, rich brown eyes, chiseled jaw with perfect stubble, a dazzling smile, dark, beautiful skin, and a tight, muscular figure wrapped in exquisitely tailored clothes. He turned every head in every room he entered, but the most unexpected thing about him was that he was as wonderful a person as he was spectacular to behold. Grace had scarcely met anyone with as kind and generous a heart as Tal. Women *loved* him, and he most assuredly loved them back.

"Aggy's right, Spitfire, it's been *much* too long. Come here." Tal beamed, and every muscle in Grace's body clenched, though this time, it was not out of excitement. What was Abnur going to do? What havoc would he wreak? *Why* wasn't he being the rude, incredibly unlikeable, and arrogant ass everyone knew him to be? She was a little stiff, hugging Tal, and begged any powers that be to keep the red *off* her face.

"It has. I'm so glad both of you could come." She stepped away from him, glancing again at Abnur, whose features were smoothed back into a neutral and horribly opaque expression. "I wasn't expecting, though, that I'd be meeting you here...in the chancellor's office."

"Yes! My very good friend, Chancellor Tharn, was just regaling us with the tale of your little excursion into Rkundzelt!" Aggy shook his pudgy little fists in excitement, wine sloshing about. Tal seemed content to observe quietly from his seat.

"Is that so?" She blinked, glancing at all three men and feeling very out of sorts about the whole thing. "And all this time, I didn't think Abnur had any friends."

"Well, he has you, doesn't he?" Aggy chuckled into his wine, and Grace's cheeks suddenly flushed. She stole a glance at Abnur, and he arched one brow at her. *Well?* His face asked.

"Yes." She cleared her throat a little. "He does."

"What was it you were just saying, Abnur? About some sort of protective device?" Aggy frowned, donning a curious expression.

"Mm, yes." Abnur nodded and nudged her arm. "Your beacons."

"What *sort* of beacons are they?" Aggy resumed his place on the small settee and stared up at her expectantly.

"Well, they were the result of me dabbling a bit with tonal architecture. Very rudimentary, of course, but for the most part, they were useful in keeping spheres and spiders from bothering us. It also held off any alarms or triggers for quite a lot longer than I've ever seen. I need more *intact* equipment, though, to further my research into it. If I could find some of the tools that they used or get more of the books translated..."

"Books?" The small man squeaked.

"Oh, yes. Abnur was able to bring back three exquisitely preserved tomes."

"I've never in my life laid eyes on a *fully* intact Dwemer book..." Aggy breathed.

“Well, I’ve got three.” She grinned.

A knock sounded on the open door, and Decir stuck his head in, looking pointedly at Abnur, who simply nodded once.

“Are we running over our allotted time, Abnur? I do apologize...” Aggy hopped up.

“Not at all, Agrilius, they can wait.”

“Oh, no, no. That won’t do at all, we won’t make others wait on account of us. Your time is valuable, and here we are, just pissing it away!” The excitable scholar set his wineglass aside and motioned to Tal to follow suit. “Very sorry to have interrupted your day, I do hope we can talk more when it’s convenient, Abnur. I’d like to hear more about these adventures you’re going on with our very lovely mutual friend here.”

“Then join us for dinner tonight.” Abnur declared as Grace sipped her wine, inhaled sharply, and choked. Her eyes watered as she tried not to succumb to a coughing fit, blinking rapidly and clearing her throat.

“What?” She wheezed.

“Were you *not* intending to invite your guests to dine with us?” Abnur looked every bit as diabolical as he was in that moment. It seemed perhaps rather than being a disagreeable shitheel, he was instead staking his claim on her. But, which was worse? Neither was good. He gave her a dismissive wave. “Nevertheless, Agrilius, you and your...assistant, are welcome to have dinner with us tonight.”

“Excellent, very good, chancellor. Looking forward to it!” Aggy beamed, heading for the door.

Grace narrowed her eyes at Abnur, who, upon their departure, stepped up close, taking the glass from her hand again.

“Spitfire?” He mocked, looking amused.

“Jealous?” She rolled her eyes at him.

“Of what?” Abnur’s gaze slid down to her lips. “See to your guests. We’ve been late enough for one day, don’t you think?”

“Mmhm.” She tugged the front of his tunic a little. “What time is dinner?”

“Seven.” A small smile crossed his lips. “And nice try with the guard.” She should have known that he’d always find a way to get his way.

“I’ll see you at seven, then.”

Outside the office, Aggy and Tal were talking quietly amongst themselves while Decir waited with a harried-looking man and woman. Grace had no interest in whatever chaos was about to erupt around them, and she went to her guests.

“I’m sure rooms have been made ready for you, and your things are being taken care of. There is *so much* I can’t wait to talk about with both of you.” She smiled. “If you need time to get settled in ahead of time, or...”

“Nonsense!” Aggy gave a wave. “We near about live on the road, my dear, and traveled by coach.

There has been *plenty* of resting already.”

“Then allow me to show you to my office in the archives.” Grace glanced back. “Come along, Quint. You can do your penance by serving as an escort for my guests while they visit.”

“Yes, milady.” Quint gave a nod and a half-smile. It wasn’t really punishment, she knew he’d been given no choice.

“It seems your friendship with the chancellor has been very beneficial.” Tal smiled as they made their way toward the Imperial Library.

“Yes, he’s been very generous.” Internally, Grace squirmed. If Tal hadn’t realized the nature of things by now, he certainly would at dinner.

“How did this all come about, my dear?” Aggy piped up.

“I was visiting the chancellor’s estate with Silero when he invited me to come to the City and make use of the library and archives. And so, here I am.”

“Ah, I see. Very convenient that Silero’s house in the city is so close by.” Aggy nodded, and Grace’s secret squirming intensified. She wasn’t ashamed of the nature of her involvement with Abnur, of course, but she also preferred her private life remain just that.

“I’m a guest here, in the palace, of Abnur’s household.”

“Even more convenient!” Aggy laughed. He never paid anyone’s private business a second thought and cared only for research and the sharing of thoughts and ideas with like-minded people. It made for a very refreshing friendship. It was Tal, though, that Grace was a bit concerned about. The conversation would no doubt continue in greater detail with him once they were out of earshot of others.

When Grace entered her office, she found Avise busily taking inventory of a large box of tiny mixed parts that hadn’t been sorted. Hereic lurched to his feet, nearly knocking his chair over as they entered. Though, when Avise did finally look up, she seemed to freeze in place, her eyes round as saucers as she stared at Tal. It was the typical reaction of anyone who found him attractive, which, by and large, was practically everyone interested in men.

“These are my assistants. Hereic has been greatly looking forward to your visit, and Avise will catch a fly if she doesn’t close her mouth.” The latter did then snap her mouth shut, clearing her throat a little and forcing herself to look anywhere but at the magnificent Redguard who smirked knowingly at Grace.

“It...it is a great pleasure to meet you, sir.” Hereic babbled, stepping forward, tattered notebook in hand. “I’ve long studied your work and try to employ your techniques, though not always very successfully...”

“Oh, quit fidgeting. What have you got?” Aggy snatched the notebook and Hereic all but did a dance. “Interesting. Do you have these plates you copied these from?”

“Yes! Ahem. Yes, of course, sir. Just over here...”

“None of this *sir* nonsense. Aggy is fine. Goodness, Grace, did they get the highest strung one they could possibly find to give you?”

“Perhaps, but I quite like him, he’s dedicated and very intelligent.” She couldn’t help but smile at

poor Hereic as he fretted.

“High praise from her, young man. I hope you appreciate it. Now, show me these.” Aggy jabbed a stubby finger at the open notebook, and they made for the worktables.

“What about you? Are you deciphering Dwemer texts or puzzling out how they smelted their metal?” Tal asked Avise. She blinked and momentarily looked calm as she responded with noises meant to be words. He waited very politely for her to get her bearings.

“No, I don’t, but yes sort of. No, and yes. A little. Mostly no.” She looked helplessly at Grace.

“Avise is training at the Healers Guild. She was whisked away from me by them for her considerable talents, which she, in fact, used to save my life once.” Grace explained. “They let me have her here still once a week.”

“Impressive.” Tal then jabbed a thumb in Grace’s direction. “This one gets herself into all kinds of messes, I’m sure you’re a good friend to have around.” He flashed a dazzling smile at Avise, who just nodded, looking from him to Grace and back again.

“I try to be the best friend I can. But, um, I do have...things to do...for the guild. It was a pleasure to meet you and...him too.” She glanced at where Aggy appeared to be telling an animated story to a riveted Hereic.

“Likewise, Avise.” Tal put his hand out to shake hers, which she did, turning almost purple, before fleeing.

“I wasn’t expecting *her* to be so flustered by you.” Grace laughed. Tal shrugged, though, and leaned against her desk. “I imagine if you and she were so inclined, you could teach her plenty. From what I understand, her experience has all been fairly disappointing.”

“She’s too young for me. Besides, I don’t want *her*.” He grinned.

“Well, you can’t have me.” Grace gave a shrug, trying to keep it light, almost impressed with herself for saying it at all.

“Why not? The *rumors* that are going around about you and the decrepit chancellor?” By the disbelief on his face, he thought such a thing was preposterous, and she didn’t have the chance to respond before Aggy appeared at her elbow.

“He *is* a bright boy. Very enthusiastic. I think he’ll be kept busy a while, though. I can see it on your face, my dear. There is more going on than a desire to show off all your shiny new things.” He nudged her, and she nodded.

“Yes, actually. Though, there wasn’t when I wrote to you. At the end of the week, a proposal is being presented to the Elder Council. Its goal is to obtain Imperial consent and support to go into Dwemer ruins and tear them apart for the metal.” As she expected, Aggy looked aghast.

“That’s...that’s...” He stammered.

“I know. And I’ve elected to argue against it. So, I’ve been building my case, and I know I would very much like to have your help while I stand against it. The opposition *will* try to discredit me, and I suspect there will be several different avenues he will take in trying to do so.”

Aggy shook his head. “No. There will be no discrediting, not on my watch. Show me what you’ve got so far, my dear.”

Late. Again...

28th of Frostfall – cont.

Tharn watched. She was in the bath, *his* bath, slouched down so that the water came up to her chin. Grace hadn't realized yet that he was there, though. She stared across the room, brow furrowed as she mulled over whatever was bothering her. He enjoyed watching her, and not even for lascivious reasons. It was the anomaly she represented, a rare creature that only ever wore one face no matter who or what she was dealing with. Not that she had much choice, she was terrible at hiding her thoughts, despite her best efforts. Her honest face and frank nature were disarming; add to that a sharp wit and incredible intelligence, and she was disarming *and* enchanting. And she had no idea, she just thought she was *weird*. He smiled to himself.

"Hester?" Grace sat forward, water sloshing, and waited for a response, which, of course, there was none. Tharn had sent the maid away for the time being. Towel in hand, he started across the chamber toward her, and when she turned, she didn't look very surprised to see him. Nor did she look disappointed, however. When had *that* started to matter?

"Towel?"

"I suppose." She eyed him with mock suspicion. "You're not the first help I'd call for when I need to put my clothes *on*." Slowly, she got to her feet, and he watched the water trickle down her bare body, feeling a familiar pang. "Are you planning to make us late for dinner, as well?" Grace arched a knowing brow and took his proffered hand as she stepped out of the tub and onto the rug. Helpfully, he draped the towel over her shoulders.

"Planning? No. But, I'm not opposed to happy accidents."

"Uh-huh." She adjusted and wrapped the towel tightly around her chest, and stepped past him to the dressing room. "I noticed that since this morning, all my belongings were very mysteriously moved to *these* drawers and cabinets, conveniently denoted with little pieces of red ribbon."

"Seems your maid is cleverer than she lets on, then."

"It's certainly been interesting watching my life be forcibly integrated with yours. I imagine, at this point, even you must be shocked." Grace started rummaging through her drawers and opening wardrobe doors.

Rather than filling the room with furniture, Tharn had built-ins installed some decades ago. It made for a neater, simpler aesthetic.

"What's forceful about it? I haven't heard you complain. Not about this, anyway. About every *other* conceivable thing, yes, but not this." He folded his arms, and she halted, looking him in the eye.

"So, if I wanted to move back to the house in the City tomorrow, you wouldn't stop me?"

"Is that what you want?" He knew it wasn't.

"No. Lucky for you. With much bigger problems to worry about, I didn't feel like wasting my energy arguing with you about my slowly dwindling personal space." She feigned a heavy,

exaggerated sigh, resuming her search and smirking. “Is *that* how you convince most people to do what you want them to? You exhaust them mentally and emotionally until they simply don’t have the will to resist anymore?”

“It’s one of several methods that have proven successful. After all, a person can only deny the inevitability that I’m right for so long before it’s glaringly obvious, don’t you think?” He gave a snort of amusement.

“Ah, foolish mortals, *doubting* the Tharn.” She shook her head but smiled at him. “What am I supposed to wear to this dinner? It’s not like it’s a formal affair. I could wear a potato sack, and Aggy wouldn’t notice, and if he did, he wouldn’t care.”

“Your *ex-lover* would notice.” What pleasant conversation was complete without a good, sharp kick to the hornet’s nest? He’d never been known to refrain from speaking his mind.

She simply shrugged, though, apparently deciding *not* to be bothered by his needling of *that* topic. As it amused him to get a rise out of her, the lack of reaction was slightly disappointing.

“Of course, he would. As a man who will dip his wick into just about anything warm and wet, he pays particular attention to the garments of females.” She also didn’t seem to mind that the Redguard was a bloody libertine. Tharn prickled at the brief flash of self-loathing he felt for wanting to know more about her involvement with *The Nobody*.

“Just another notch, then, in the proverbial bedpost?” Would *that* raise her hackles? It seemed not. Grace took the dark red dress he liked from its hanger and peered up at him, eyes narrowed.

“Why should I care if I was a meaningless lover?” She *knew* Tharn, and he hated it. But he didn’t hate it. It mattered that she understood the subtexts he sometimes resorted to, though not always to his benefit. “I was never in love with him if *that’s* your concern.” He was immediately poised to decry the preposterous accusation, but she didn’t give him the chance, brushing it away with a dismissive wave. “He *is* my friend, though. If that’s a problem, you’re just going to have to suck it up, Abnur, because…” There was nowhere good this discussion could go, but since he’d started it, he’d put an end to it.

Without preamble or warning, Tharn kissed Grace full on the mouth, effectively ending the conversation, then made a mental note to employ the technique more often. Though the efficacy was questionable, depending on the setting and the topic.

“What was that for?” She breathed.

To shut you up, he managed not to say. Hm, and he’d best not if there was to be any chance of dessert before dinner. Tharn adjusted his answer accordingly.

“Does it matter?” He asked, instead.

“Not really. Seems it might be contributing to the likelihood that I agree to *tardiness*, though.” Grace shrugged, pleased with herself to have pressed just the right buttons. He grabbed her, plucking the dress from her hands and tossing it onto the sizeable round ottoman in the center of the room, then kissed her in earnest.

It was a thing he’d never cared for or thought much about before, kissing. He had certainly never put his mouth on a whore, and it was little more than obligation with his wives. Some wanted it, others preferred he hurry up and be done.

But now, Tharn found himself craving the feel of Grace’s lips on his. And anywhere *else* she

wanted to put them. Her considerable talent in that regard was something even he lacked adequate words for.

Maybe it was the way she pressed herself wantonly against him, or the small, genuinely eager sounds that escaped her. It was strange behavior, to be sure, if measured against all his other experience.

That little pink tongue against his, though, how it made his need thrum through every inch of his body. Already, Tharn was on the verge of leaving coherent thought behind.

No, it wasn't any particular thing she did that set her apart; it was that she wasn't pretending. It wasn't an act; there was no ruse. She took as much pleasure from his body as he took from hers.

Refocused on the matter at hand, he loosed the towel, letting it drop to the floor, and Grace pulled back, glancing around them. Her gaze halted on the padded bench, and she reached down, finding him hard and ready. An involuntary groan rose up. The fact they'd gone twice that morning made no difference to the hunger he had for her. The relentless, frustrating, and delightful preoccupation he had with the pleasure derived from this woman was not something he'd experienced before. Tharn had lived a long time; firsts were an incredible rarity for him. As a young man, he'd known single-minded lust, of course, but it hadn't been specific to anyone.

"We probably shouldn't take *too* long." Gently, she urged him back toward the ottoman.

"It would be a shame to rush." He sat down, drinking in the sight of her. She was not a hard-bodied twenty-something; such figures did not send his blood racing. It was the curve of her hips, the swell of her breasts, and oh, how they shook when she lay beneath him when he took her hard. He yearned for her softness, though.

The instant Grace took his face between her hands and kissed him, he could focus only on how she felt; her skin beneath his fingers, and hers, as they combed through his hair, sending a little shiver down his spine. Even *he* could afford a little time to set every pressing matter aside for this. For her.

Hastily, with desire clawing at him, he pulled his tunic up as she knelt, straddling his lap. She reached between her legs, and satisfied with the glistening results, took hold of him to guide as she sat down. Tharn's eyes closed as he relished the warmth and wetness, groaning as she squeezed around him.

In that moment, nothing else existed in the whole of Nirn. There was no dinner, no guests, no palace, no Empire...nothing. It had been that way since the first time he'd slipped inside her, and each subsequent time. His whole body hummed as the urge to move grew stronger, and he wrapped his arms around her.

Every touch, every stroke, felt more potent than anything else ever had. She moaned softly as her hips ground against his, moving in a circle. But it felt too good too quickly, and he grasped her hips, holding her still.

"Slow down." He murmured against her neck, kissing and tasting her skin.

"It's already seven, Abnur..."

"I don't care." It didn't matter what time it was; he'd ensure she took as much pleasure as he did. Tharn was a selfish man, but her fulfillment meant his own. He glanced back at the stool they were perched on. It wasn't quite big enough. "Hold onto me."

“What?”

“Just do as I say.” As she put her arms around his neck, Tharn shifted forward, then got down off the seat as she grinned.

“On the floor like animals, Abnur?” She was very clearly in no way opposed. There was a large area rug, it would be fine.

“I will have you where I like.” He growled, moving his hips. She inhaled sharply, bowing up a little, but then he settled over her, rocking more gently, making sure he put just the right pressure on just the right spot. Grace’s hands moved up his sides and over his back, her eyes fixed on his.

“What are you...? That’s never going to finish you off...*oh*...”

“Me? No.” He grinned, increasing the pressure and his pace. “But certainly you.” He watched her face, feeling her tense up. Her breathing became quick and shallow as she neared climax, then she gripped his backside with both hands, moving up against him. Exercising near-legendary restraint, he was able to keep himself in check.

“*Now*, Abnur...” She gasped suddenly, and he braced himself on his hands, driving hard and fast into her as she gripped his arms. The cry tore from her, and Tharn quickly put one hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. She’d mentioned the echo the apartment had. Her body clenched around him, and he was undone, squeezing his eyes shut as he came hard, pushing deep.

Why wasn’t he tired of this yet? Every time they started, he was overcome with ridiculous notions and completely irrelevant observation. Though, perhaps the twinge of frustration came more from the fact that even his post-coital clarity of mind agreed with at least the objective determinations he had whilst all the blood was in his cock rather than his brain. He concurred with the idiot, erection-laden version of himself that she was, by far, the most physically gratifying woman he’d been with. To analyze what might be the more subjective side of things would be treading in territory best left alone.

Grace’s arms and legs were wrapped around him. They were lying on the floor of his dressing room. Less conspicuous, at least, than the Elder Council table.

“I’m going to need another bath, you bloody bastard.” She, too, seemed to come to her senses afterward. Regardless, Tharn seemed unable to refrain from smiling and had accepted that it was only a matter of time before they were back to pawing at one another like horny adolescents.

Did he really mind, though? It could be worse.

“No time, we’re already late.”

“You have no one to blame but yourself.” Grace sighed but looked pleased. Tharn carefully pushed himself up. His knees a little bruised from being on the floor. He helped her up, handing her back her towel and the red dress.

“Good choice.” He nodded at the garment. “And leave your hair down.” Whatever had been holding the wild mass of dark brown waves up had come undone in the midst of *things*. She looked surprised but didn’t comment.

“Best get moving then.” She rubbed the fabric between her fingers. “Send Hester back in when you go. She’s probably all flustered now.”

Small talk stretched on over the soup. Dreaded, pointless descriptions of the trip and the weather and road conditions. Tharn was only half-listening, just enough that if absolutely required to respond or comment, he could. The color was still high in Grace's cheeks, and his gaze kept wandering to her kiss-swollen lips. He was pointedly ignoring The Nobody's deep, unhappy scrutiny. Despite the ongoing conversation, he kept staring at Grace and then at Tharn. To Tharn's great amusement, the Redguard *had* looked rather disconcerted when they'd emerged together, definitely late. He wasn't even a little bit sorry.

Agrilius appeared oblivious. Though, Tharn suspected the jolly scholar paid much closer attention to things than he let on. The reassuring, or perhaps conciliating pat he gave the Redguard's arm at their arrival, had not escaped his notice.

"I suppose this time of year, you probably don't travel much, Abnur." Agrilius peered at him through the magnification of his ridiculous spectacles.

"Mostly between Nibenay and the City. Though, I had thought to spend year-end at the Topal coast." Up until that moment, he'd not voiced that particular thought.

"What? Really?" Grace looked up, eyes wide. "You never said we..." She stopped, and he watched her biting the inside of her cheek, having inadvertently interjected personal implications into the conversation, and she backpedaled. "It's rather beautiful there this time of the year, I'm told. Warmer than here, anyway."

"I've spent a winter in Skyrim before, the cold's not so bad." The Nobody spoke up with a sly smile. "There are ways to keep warm." Grace blushed, shoveling soup into her mouth and avoiding eye contact. Impressive, considering that it was fish soup, which she loathed. Tharn knew very well that she, too, had spent a winter in Skyrim during a long-term dig at one of the Dwemer sites. Apparently, it was the same winter.

"I'd have thought you'd prefer the desert, Calaway." Tharn shrugged and sipped his wine. The soup bowls were cleared, and entrees brought.

"*Talaray*." The Nobody bristled. "My time in Hammerfell was brief; most of my life has been in northern Cyrodiil."

"Aggy, what have you been working on these days?" Grace artfully moved things forward. "You haven't written in a while to tell me."

"Oh! I decided that the entry at home needed something *majestic*, and so I've slowly been acquiring parts and reassembling a centurion. For aesthetics alone, of course, I wouldn't want an operational one. It seemed like a good idea to give my brain a short rest and have some *fun*." Agrilius grinned. "Not that translating and agonizing over the smallest unknown words isn't fun, but..." He shrugged a little.

"I imagine that will be quite impressive once finished." Grace smiled at him. "Just a few weeks ago in Rkundzelt, a centurion nearly killed me. I wish I'd known you were looking for parts." Agrilius gasped but wasn't able to reply.

"Whatever happened to your dreams of finding an oculory?" The Redguard peered at her.

"There is very little information that even I have found..." She blinked, looking a bit taken aback

by the sudden topic shift. Tharn remembered several occasions when she'd talked about that particular desire, but not for some time.

"It seems difficult to make much progress shut up in a palace. You're not being...kept from your dreams, are you?"

"Tal..." She frowned. "Why would I be...?"

"Between the library, the archives, and the vaults, there are more resources available here than anywhere else. Not to mention, the Arcane University is here as well." Tharn offered. "As I'm sure you know, there resides the Imperial Orrery, which could provide insight aplenty."

"Resources mean nothing if there isn't *adequate* access to them." The dark glare burned across the table, and Grace's brow furrowed further as she looked from Tharn to her *former* lover.

"I'm not sure how the state of my ambitions affects you, but I am kept from nothing, and I do exactly as *I* please." Her tone changed, getting that dangerous sort of note to it that Tharn was so familiar with. She looked at Agrilius instead. The old scholar seemed intent on his dinner. The only indication otherwise was the right red his ears had become. "I suppose if the rumors I've heard about the powers of such an oculory were true, it could be disastrous in the wrong hands."

"Indeed, if its rumors of safe transcription of elder scrolls bear any merit." Agrilius nodded, stroking his chin.

"It would be invaluable, especially to the Empire, regardless of its functionality." Tharn cut his steak. "I recall what you told me about it." Agrilius opened his mouth to comment but was again interrupted by his adopted son.

"Invaluable to the Empire or invaluable to *you*?"

"As the chancellor of the Elder Council, there is little difference." Tharn narrowed his eyes, setting down his utensils, ready for what would definitely be an unfair battle of wits. He hadn't expected such open hostility, not that he wasn't used to it. "Just what *is* your expertise on the matter, Calaway? Have you extensively studied Dwemer mechanics and the implications of reading an elder scroll, *if* such superstitious nonsense is to be believed?"

"I'm not a scholar, nor have I claimed to be one. My education was in economics and finance..."

"Then what are you even doing here?" Tharn scoffed, and Grace threw down her fork and knife, well beyond fed up.

"Why don't the two of you just get your cocks out right here and now, and measure them, hm? Will *that* clear things up?" She made an exasperated noise, crossing her arms.

"Hard, or flaccid?" The Redguard asked, and Tharn actually gave a snort of amusement.

"For fuck's sake." She muttered, shaking her head. "I've lost my appetite. Thank you, both." He hadn't quite intended for dinner to go this awry, but even he couldn't un-ring a bell. "Aggy, I'm sorry for your visit to have started off like this, I'm sure we can speak tomorrow without the interruptions of these ignorant children. Do excuse me." Frustrated, she put her napkin on the table, rose, and left the dining room. A short moment later, the main entry door slammed.

Overwhelming

STILL 28th of Frostfall

Agrilius gave his adopted son a brief, disappointed look before heaving a sigh. He gently put his utensils down, pushing back his chair.

“I’m very sorry, Abnur, I do hope you’ll forgive me, but I think I would like to go and speak with Gratiaren...”

“I understand, of course. Better you than me.” Tharn shrugged his shoulders. If he were to appear at her side at this moment, he had a better chance of being disemboweled than successfully saying five words to her. “You’ll find her in her office in the archives, no doubt.”

“Thank you, Abnur. Ah, Tal, perhaps you’d best return to our rooms for the evening.” Agrilius cleared his throat, standing up. The Redguard cast Tharn a dirty look before surging to his feet and leaving the room without another word.

“Good luck, Agrilius, you’ll probably need it.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, old friend.” Agrilius gave a laugh. “I will be fine. You, on the other hand...”

"Yes, yes..."

The door clicked quietly open, and Grace clenched and unclenched her teeth. Whichever one of them it was, was going to have a very bad night.

“So help me if I look up and see either of the two infantile man-babies...” She muttered.

“I am sorry to disappoint, my dear, but it’s just me.” Came Aggy’s soft reply. She turned at once, wilting a little with relief. He closed the door.

“Oh, Aggy. You’re welcome, of course.” She got up, smiling apologetically.

“Are you alright?” Concern knitted his brow.

“Yes, I’m alright, not to worry. I am very well accustomed to Abnur. Though Tal’s behavior was a bit of a shock.”

“He is concerned, is all.” He let out a long breath but looked up, eyes widening. “Though please don’t take that to mean I am excusing his abhorrent display tonight.”

“No, no...”

“I am concerned, too.” It was a rare moment, Agrilius Philellian being entirely serious. “I care for you very much, Gratiaren, you must know. If I was ever to have had a daughter, I would have prayed to the gods to give me one just like you.”

"I'm sorry to have caused you concern, Aggy." They sat in the chairs in front of her desk. "Really, there's nothing to worry about."

"There is no denying that Abnur Tharn is a brilliant, well-educated man." He started. "He is well-connected and wealthy...but I cannot say for sure if he is a good man."

"Are any of us *all* good?" Grace deflected, knowing full well that many, *many* people despised and decried Abnur as one of the vilest people on the face of Nirn. There were many things he'd done that she didn't agree with, but for the most part, she agreed with *why* he'd done them. She was as much a patriot as he was.

"Is he good to *you*?" The question startled her; it wasn't what she expected to be asked. She assumed everyone would want to know what in oblivion she was thinking getting involved with a Tharn. Especially *that* Tharn.

"I want to strangle him at any given moment, but...yes."

"Well, that's what matters, then, isn't it? Your happiness is what's important." His usual smile had returned, and he patted her knee. A sudden, unexpected bubble of emotion lodged itself in Grace's throat, and she looked away, blinking back the strange prickling in her eyes. "Oh! Oh, my dear... are you *not* happy?" Aggy grabbed her hand in both of his, and she shook her head, clearing her throat.

"No, no, I am, don't worry." She gave a weak smile. "No one's said that to me before, is all."

"What? That your happiness is important?" He looked a little horrified. "My dear, of *course* it is! Many would disagree with me, but life is much too short to do nothing but sacrifice and suffer." He squeezed her hand, giving it a shake until she really smiled.

"Thank you for that."

"I was in love once, you know." He got a wistful, faraway sort of look.

"Oh? Who was she?"

"Tal's mother."

"His mother? Is he actually your son?"

"No, no, of course not. I could not produce a child that handsome. Look at me!" He chuckled.

"When I was still a young man, my father's chief banker and very good friend lived in a house on our estate with his wife and daughter."

"The daughter, then?"

"Yes. Ah, what a beauty she was, just about the same age as I was. Talia was her name. We were inseparable if you can believe such a thing! In my younger years, I wasn't quite so...portly." Aggy grinned, patting his belly. "Despite not being the tallest, handsomest young man, she loved me anyway. She was brilliant, what a head for figures she had, just like her father. We were certain with our families being as close as they were that they'd be delighted by the match. While I don't mean to scandalize you, my dear, but we spent many a night sneaking off together even though we were not wed." He smiled, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Grace listened quietly; he'd never really talked much about his personal life before.

"What happened?" She could guess, and it probably wasn't good.

“Well, her father had already made her a match. A very wealthy man from Sentinel. So, when our attachment came to light, he whisked her away at once, sending her away with her mother to Alik’s to ensure no *irreparable* mistakes could happen.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Aggy.” She put a hand on his shoulder, but he smirked.

“Not to worry, my dear. Agrilius Philellian was *not* to be discouraged! She married the wealthy man, who was a trader, always away, and *I* did quite a lot of historical excavating out in the surrounding desert.” His smirk blossomed into a grin. “I hope you do not think less of me, but our love would not be deterred. We were careful, no one suspected a man like me would be involved with a beauty such as she. I’m fairly certain I cannot father children, I found. By then, I *surely* should have.” He pursed his lips, tapping one finger on them as he pondered.

“Wow, I would have never thought...” Grace spluttered in shock.

“I know!” He gave a delighted laugh. “That was why we got away with it!”

“How then did Tal come into the picture?”

“Well, her husband was not a cruel man, at least. He knew she didn’t love him, but he was kind, and so she attended to her duties as a wife when he was around, thinking the least she could do was give him an heir if possible. At the time, we had no idea if the barrenness lie with her or with me.”

“So, Tal is his son?”

“Yes, and shortly after he was born, her husband was lost at sea, but it was plenty of time to establish the boy as his sole heir, all the paperwork was done. Tal has known me his whole life, I’m the only father he’s known, so adopted son or not, he is my son.”

“Of course.” She nodded.

“He was about two years old when Talia fell ill. It was the single most devastating thing I’ve ever experienced, losing her. And I’ve never loved another. Before passing, she legally made him my ward, and we were both with her when the time came, though he didn’t understand, of course.”

“Does he know that you and his mother were...”

“Oh, yes, of course. He knows everything.” Aggy gave a little wave. “Children need the truth, you know, so I always told him the truth. He inherited his father’s kindness and generosity, his mother’s beauty and her brains, and my hunger for travel and exploration! He may not be a scholar, but he does love to see the world.”

“However tragic your loss, it is a beautiful story. Thank you for telling me.” It was touching and eye-opening. Grace had never really thought about how Tal had come to be Aggy’s son.

“Well, I just thought you should know that if Talia could love me, well, then there must be someone for everyone, and I suppose it can be those we would never expect.” He smiled up at her. “I used to think that you and Tal would end up together and make the most beautiful children to appear on the face of Nirn.”

“I...I’m sorry, Aggy.” She sighed.

“Not to worry, it is just the silly whims of a father. Tal cares a great deal about you, but I’ve always known your feelings didn’t reach beyond a caring friendship.” He leaned forward conspiratorially, nudging her with his elbow. “A father knows these things.”

"I know that everyone thinks I'm here trading my body for this office." Grace slumped a little.

"Well, *I* know that you're not. Anyone with two operational eyes in their head could tell that!" He laughed. Was it really so obvious? On one hand, she didn't want to be seen as opportunistic, but on the other, it was likely someone out to harm Abnur who had sent the duke after her, thinking to wound him more personally.

"I'm sorry dinner got ruined."

"Nonsense; that was the most entertaining thing I've seen all year. Abnur Tharn, *jealous*. Who'd have ever believed such a thing possible?"

"Oh, don't ever let him hear you even suggest it." She grinned and got to her feet, stomach growling a little. "Hopefully, Nalea set some dinner aside. You must be hungry, too..." She whirled around, then, fixing him with a worried stare. "You didn't leave Tal *with* Abnur, did you?"

"No, certainly not!" He guffawed.

"Oh, good." She let out a long breath. "I don't think I have the mental fortitude right now to deal with another body."

"Another?" Aggy's brows arched high, but not in shock or horror as would have been expected, but curiosity. Realizing she'd slipped up, Grace cleared her throat.

"Figuratively speaking."

"Ah, right, right." He nodded, not believing her at all.

Once Aggy had left, Grace sat at her desk, enjoying the silence. Abnur knew better than to come looking for her, and Portney was on duty outside the office door. There was peace for the time being. There had been no illusions of dinner being an entirely pleasant affair, but she'd been hoping it wouldn't go beyond perhaps strained silence or dirty looks. It was foolish to think it would be anything but the shit show that it was. Could it have been worse? Yes, but it could have been better, too.

It *was* something of a surprise, though, that Tal had been the instigator. Usually, she could have bet that Abnur would be the one to throw the first punch, considering his inability to keep his snide remarks to himself. It seemed that she underestimated the breadth of Tal's friendship. He was probably the most stunning man she'd ever met, let alone slept with, but her feelings toward him had never evolved beyond a platonic friendship. Well, a platonic friendship with sex peppered in. It *had* been more than a year, though.

The office door burst open suddenly, startling Grace. She looked up, expecting to see Tal, who, unlike Abnur, did *not* know better. Instead, Clivia swept in, closing the door behind her with a careless bang.

"You've got to be kidding me...Clivia, what in the ever-living fuck do you want?" It was nearly quarter past ten.

"We need to talk." Abnur's youngest daughter started opening cupboards, searching. There was no point in asking how she even knew Grace was there. "Where's your wine?"

"I'm not Abnur, I don't have a whole cabinet of it."

“I don’t believe for a moment you don’t have any.”

“Obviously, I have some, but I’m hoping you won’t be here long enough for it to be necessary to offer you any.” Grace folded her arms.

“Bad luck for you, then. Get it out.” Clivia sat in one of the chairs by the desk. She wasn’t done up in her usual jewels and Imperial regalia.

“This night just keeps getting better and better.” Grace clenched her teeth, letting out a long breath, but opened a cabinet behind her and took out a bottle of red she’d needed an excuse to get rid of anyway.

“Mm, breaking out the good vintage, just for me?” Clivia scoffed, sipping from her glass once she had it.

“I hate red wine.” Grace left her glass untouched. “So, what do you want?”

“We share an enemy, you and I.” Her unwelcome guest started.

“Is that so? Have you taken to self-loathing these days?”

“Hilarious. What wit. I can see why my father is so fond of you.” The empress rolled her eyes, and it was disturbingly familiar. Her twin older sisters weren’t nearly as heinous as she was. In fact, they were, for the most part, perfectly lovely. For Tharns. “Emedia Audtidenius.”

“What of her?” Grace prickled, unhappy in the knowledge that Clivia, of all people, was aware of the enmity between her and the raven-haired bitch.

“She’s been fucking my husband.”

“Clivia, *you* don’t even fuck your husband. What does it matter? Leovic’s a Reachman, he’ll mount anything that holds still long enough.”

“That’s irrelevant. I think she means to replace me.” Clivia huffed, for the first time looking the tiniest bit unsettled.

“I’m rather certain every wife of every man she’s ever spoken to feels that way. But, she’s low-born, she could never be empress anyway, every noble would be outraged. Your husband is a backwater savage, but even *he* isn’t stupid enough to risk your father’s wrath.” It was a little bit fascinating to see Clivia Tharn out of sorts. They’d despised each other since...the beginning of time, she was sure.

“She’s very convincing.” Clivia downed the rest of her wine, and Grace passed her the bottle without missing a beat.

“Alright, so you want to get rid of her, why not just...get rid of her?”

“I could, if I wanted, but it would be easier for everyone if there was a more transparent and widely accepted way to get rid of her. If she’s guilty of orchestrating the attempted rape on you, executing her will be no problem.”

“It wouldn’t be a public execution.”

“Of course not, that would risk uncovering what you and my father did to the Duke of Colovia.” Clivia looked smug as Grace’s discomfort became more apparent. Obviously, Abnur trusted his

daughter, however much she irritated him. “Are you upset that my father tells me all these things? Did you think they were *secrets* just between the two of you?”

“I trust his judgment.” But she didn’t have to like it. Grace did her best to school her face.

“Family comes before everything, Gratiaren. As my father’s plaything, you are at the bottom of the list. Don’t forget that.” Not unlike her father, Clivia was masterfully skilled with verbal weapons, and on a night like this, with everything in chaos, the armor that would have protected Grace was not there, and the blade sank deep.

“I forget nothing, Clivia. Ever.” The calm that settled over her was that which usually preceded her doing something rash. The bitch had come to taunt her on one of the worst possible nights, and patience was running thin. “I’m not convinced that Emedia is the one behind what happened. She’d a vile, conniving harpy, of course, but manipulation and seduction are her preferred weapons. It doesn’t fit with her usual toolkit to get someone raped.”

As though expecting this response, Clivia held out a folded letter, the seal on it broken, again, looking smug. Grace took it and looked at the broken wax, monogrammed with a letter E. Opening it, she saw that it was a letter to Leovic from Emedia. The beginning was the usual lovers’ nonsense, but it was near the end that she stopped and reread.

It is only a matter of time before the thorn in my side is gone, and I will have the workspace I deserve. Soon enough, I will have attained a position that will render my humble origins meaningless. I am ever grateful for your help, should you choose to give it. This is your empire, after all. Why should you allow others to govern it for you?

Grace looked up as a sick feeling came over her. “Is Leovic...”

“He never got that letter. And many others. There is no mail he receives that isn’t read by someone else first. A man like that must be kept on a short leash. There is no telling, though, what they’ve discussed in person. She is very ambitious.” Clivia took the letter back. “I haven’t shown this to my father yet. He’s looking for any excuse to get rid of her. You should feel honored.”

“I’m not sure I should feel honored that someone is willing to kill for me.”

“Why not? He never did such a thing for any of his other wives.” Clivia shrugged. Other wives? Grace was not his wife, nor would she be.

“You boggle the mind.” Grace shook her head. “You show up, almost seeming as if you want to offer some assistance, despite it being self-serving. You insult me, which I always expect. Then it’s almost as if you tried to be nice. Almost.”

“Shouldn’t we try to get along?” The empress got to her feet, a sly look on her face. “It seems my father hasn’t grown bored of you yet, so we’re stuck with one another, aren’t we?”

“I appreciate the information regarding Emedia. I will continue to look into her as a potential candidate for...getting rid of.” Grace stood and held out the wine bottle. “Here, take this. I heard you like a bottle before bed.” Clivia glared, but then snatched it from her hand and left without another word.

There was just too much going on all at once. Grace's head was pounding, and at half-past midnight, she finally made her way back to Abnur's apartments. Not particularly keen on dealing with him, she went to the sofa in his study and laid down. Mental exhaustion led her to sleep; otherwise, she'd never have been able to stop thinking long enough to rest.

It felt like her eyes were closed for only thirty seconds when a hand on her shoulder roused her once more. Blinking, she looked up and saw Abnur in his nightshirt, then.

"I know you think you're punishing *me* by sleeping out here, but you're only punishing yourself." His voice was quiet, and oddly lacked the biting tone she'd have expected him to use for such a comment. "Come."

"I *don't* want to talk about dinner." She rubbed her face. "Not tonight anyway."

"Good. Neither do I."

"I don't want to have sex, either."

"Come to *bed*. Not, come bed me." Abnur sighed, pulling her to her feet. Disgruntled, and half awake, Grace followed without further complaint. Her hair was a tangled mess, and the red dress was rumpled. She eyed him warily as he unfastened and unlaced her dress but said nothing as he handed her nightshirt over for her to put on.

"Your daughter is a malignant bitch." She finally muttered.

"You're going to need to be more specific, ten of them are still living."

"Which do you think?" Grace glared.

"What did Clivia do?"

"Showed up in my office tonight." She shuffled away and got up onto the bed. "Do you really tell her everything?"

"Only if it's important. What did she say to you?" He frowned a little.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." Pulling the covers back, she got into bed.

"Two lies, back to back, but I'd rather go to sleep than try to pry it from you." Abnur got into bed, glancing over at her as she stared into the canopy.

She hated that Clivia was right, but it wasn't a surprise, it wasn't anything she didn't know. Grace had never fancied herself to be high on any list of priorities. It was easier than being disappointed. But she was anyway. This was the trouble with feelings; the good ones seemed never to last long enough, and the bad ones clung like fish market stench.

"It's not usual that she's actually able to hurt you." Abnur mused.

"I'm *not* hurt." The reply was too quick.

"Three lies."

"Shut up." She was starting to feel tired again and started to turn over to face away from him, but Abnur grabbed her arm, stopping her. Her head whipped around, and he kissed her then. It wasn't his intent-filled and lust-fueled embrace that she usually got from him in bed. "I said I didn't want..."

“We’re not. Go to sleep.” He laid back on his pillow, and with a small gesture, the candles extinguished.

Clarity

29th of Frostfall

“What about the magistrate?” Grace flipped through her notes as her little clandestine meeting convened.

“I spoke with him again this morning, milady.” Decir sat back in his chair, legs crossed. He had no need for notes. In his position, it would have been rather stupid for there to be written evidence of...most anything he did, really. “He has reviewed the materials and has several meetings set up to speak with some of the individuals you mentioned. Just as a precaution. He said what you provided was already more than necessary.”

“Good. I wasn’t sure how keen he would be to lend his assistance.”

“On the contrary, he seemed rather pleased to be asked a personal favor from the cha—” He stopped.

“From the chancellor’s mistress, you mean?” Grace gave him a wry look, and J’ravi looked confused.

“They call you mistress, but the chancellor has no wife...” Using her teeth, she adjusted the little lace and fabric cuffs she wore.

“Options are fairly limited in terms of addressing the misnomer, so I’ve stopped caring.”

“Humans are so strange. J’ravi has been lover to many and felt no shame. Each was honored to be chosen.” The Alfiq fluffed her fur, and Decir glanced over at her, where she was perched on the edge the desk, then decided not to say whatever had popped into his head.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter, as long as the magistrate is on board, and everything is in place.” Grace set her quill down, mulling over what she planned to say at the hearing.

“This one had hoped for more interesting things to happen, that Baron is *dull*. Even his trips to the brothel were boring.” J’ravi sighed.

“You followed him in *there*?” Grace gaped. “How did no one notice? Even pretending to be a cat, I think someone would notice you.”

“They know J’ravi there.” She purred.

“What?” Decir stared.

“Don’t look so *shocked*, you bipedal prude. This one just likes to watch.” J’ravi gave a toothy grin at them both then rolled her eyes. “The point is that there is little to report on the boring Baron himself.”

“Alright, noted...seems things are falling into place, then. My major concern at the moment will be what he will do to attempt to discredit me. He will no doubt cite my involvement with Abnur, but Abnur isn’t stupid, so I imagine he will recuse himself from the vote. I have plenty of publications, and between Aggy and Rasania, I’ve got quite a bit of academic support.” Grace’s

mind went on racing as it had been non-stop since she woke up. She wanted to be prepared for anything, but there was no way to know what would be thrown at her. Perhaps, if she was lucky, he would simply make a fool of himself. “But, none of that has anything to do with the two of you. So, I think for now you’re free to go. I do appreciate all your help, of course.”

“It is marginally more interesting than napping in the sun all day.” J’ravi hopped off the desk, trotting toward the door. “Slippery valet, this one requires your assistance with the door.”

“Just let me know if you need anything else.” Decir sighed and let J’ravi out before exiting himself.

The departure of her impromptu spies was immediately followed by a soft knock, and Grace looked up to see Tal enter, looking contrite.

“I come in peace...” He was holding something behind his back.

“Are you planning to leave in more than one piece?” She fixed him with a glare.

“I brought that goat cheese you like.” He held out a small parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“Well, there are certainly worse offerings.” Grace let out a long breath and came out from behind her desk.

“I am sorry for last night, I know I should have kept my mouth shut, there’s no excuse...” Tal looked down, shaking his head. At least she could trust that he really meant it when he made apologies. “I was shocked, I suppose, and behaved like an ass because of it.”

“Shocked by what, exactly?” She folded her arms.

“That you think your research is worth enduring an arrangement with *him*. If you needed more space to work or access to more information, you know Aggy would have been only too happy to help...”

“Tal...” Grace pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes and sighed. “It’s *not* an arrangement, and even if it were, it wouldn’t be anyone’s gods-damned business.” She looked at him, well beyond tired of people feeling they had any right to lob at her their opinions on what she chose to do.

“You’re right...I overstepped, I’m sorry. I know you’re an intelligent woman capable of weighing the pros and cons of your choices. He just doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would appreciate all the things that make you...you.” Tal held out the parcel, and she took it.

“Abnur is a...difficult person. He doesn’t make anything easy for anyone.” Red bloomed in her cheeks, and she looked down at the parcel in her hand. “I know that no one thinks he’s...nice. But he has driven me my whole life to seek knowledge. To ask questions and never stop digging. My hunger to learn and understand things has grown to what it is because of his encouragement. Well, his version of encouragement.” A small smile slid across her lips, and she glanced up at Tal, who was trying to understand.

“So, all of that makes you feel like you have to crawl into his bed?” He arched a brow, obviously baiting her.

“*No*. If you must know, I actually want him.”

“There. Was that so hard to admit?”

“Yes. I’ve never really handled *feeling* things very well, so mostly I always tried...not to.”

“I had noticed.” Tal nodded, looking just a little amused.

“Well, the short of it is that I’m choosing to be here with him, and I don’t care if no one understands because most of the time, even I don’t.”

“I accept that, and I won’t question you again. Even if I do hate him.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “I can play nice if I have to.”

“Oh, don’t even bother trying, he hates your fucking guts.” She laughed aloud. “You’re better off pretending he doesn’t exist.”

“Just because of last night?”

“Ha! No, of course not. He can’t stand that the most beautiful man on the face of Nirn was my lover.” She was beginning to feel a bit lighter about things again, seeing the humor of the entire mess.

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not, but the fact of the matter is the choice you made. Shouldn’t that matter to him more than your past?”

“It does, he’s just got to be an ass about it because that’s what he does. Like all men, there is a petulant toddler inside that loves to throw a good tantrum.” She grinned as Tal gaped, incredulous.

“Hey, that is not a fair assessment of men.” He frowned, and Grace shrugged her shoulders. “So, did he get in trouble for last night, too?”

“Well,” She began. “I told him we’re going to talk about it, but I didn’t tell him when. So, I’ll let that torture him for the rest of the day, which will be punishment enough by tonight, I suspect.”

“Wow, that’s cold. But effective.”

“Sometimes, effective is all that matters.”

The day was spent pulling reference materials and transcribing various bits that would be useful. Grace was careful not to take any passages out of context, lest there be any room for complaint about her official rebuttal. It eased her mind to have Aggy’s help and reassured her that she had chosen the best arguments and the right course of action.

Abnur had not dropped in at all, which was something of a surprise. She’d expected that despite what happened, he’d go on being nosey and jealous. He was in the chancellery office well after nightfall, and everyone else had already left. Grace watched him for a long moment from the corridor as he sat writing and checking between three different open books on his desk. There was a deep line of consternation between his brows, and she wondered what he was working on.

Why was it so easy for her to forgive the ridiculous things he did? His apologies were never with words, but there was always something to make up for his foolishness. It would have been worse, probably, if he was always doing the same things, but there was plentiful variety to his bad behavior.

He stubbornly ignored her when she entered, as she figured he might. He hadn’t bothered her all day, but he’d definitely spotted her out and about in the archives with Tal at one point. Had he been

sulking all afternoon about it?

Grace went to Abnur's side, and when he paused his scribbling, she took his arm by the wrist and held it up so she could sit across his lap, wedged neatly between him and the desk. Once she was situated, he resumed his work as though she wasn't even there. He hadn't so much as glanced at her, and she wondered just how much of a game this would turn out to be. Draping her arms about his neck, she kissed his jaw, then his neck as still he didn't react. It wasn't until she took his earlobe between her teeth, sucking gently, that a small tremor ran through him as he fought to maintain his poise.

Abnur sighed and put down his pen, finally looking at her, impatience on his face. If he was actually angry, she wouldn't have even made it into his lap, so he could pretend all he liked, she knew him too well. Grace kissed his lips, and he didn't respond, but she didn't give up. He would give in, it was inevitable, and she was sure. She kept kissing him, leaning against him, and then just the tiniest sound escaped her, and it was like a switch had been thrown.

"You're relentless." He growled into the kiss, and his tongue thrust past her lips, arms tightening around her. Ah, triumph. He was pleased, though, she could tell. He pulled back almost reluctantly. "I noticed you readily forgave The Nobody for his rude and obnoxious outbursts at our dinner table."

"The what?" Her brow furrowed.

"Your Redguard *stud*."

"He's not *my* anything. Really, Abnur. You're unbearable." Grace rolled her eyes.

"Yet here you are, bearing me. And in my lap, no less."

"He *apologized*, which I know is a foreign and unknowable concept to you." She shifted a little, making it easier to look into his eyes. "And, he brought me cheese."

"Cheese?" He gaped. "*Cheese* is all it took for you to forgive him? *I* had to build you a bloody dynamo core, last time."

"I thought you'd be pleased to be held to a higher standard." Grace gave a small shrug, and Abnur smiled, suddenly, one of his very rare, genuine smiles.

"That's a fair point, wily girl." He murmured, then surprised her with a slow, scorching kiss.

"I want you, you know." She whispered, warmed to the core by his embrace.

"What? Right now?" A smirk replaced his smile.

"Now. Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow. Next month. Next week. Next year." Her insides were very jittery; it was dangerous to say those kinds of things, but she meant it.

"That sounds exhausting." He bent, and his breath hot against her neck.

"*You* are exhausting. And frustrating and infuriating."

"I figured you only wanted me for my body."

"Well, it isn't your personality." Grace shook her head. "Unfortunately, you have a fairly interesting mind. Though, I can't say I'm much inclined to stroke your ego by elaborating on why."

“If you’re so worried about my ego swelling from pontification about my unfathomable brilliance, feel free to discuss my body instead. Then something *else* will swell...” He bit her, and she inhaled sharply, pulling back, and he grinned.

“For such an old, *old* man, your virility is something of a shock, I must say.” Grace stopped his hand as it made its way up her thigh. “*Anyway*, as I was saying...your mind...”

“Mmhm, what about it?” He popped open the top button of her shirt. “I do enjoy having my finer qualities lauded.”

“Well, I am pleased we can hold intelligent discussions, and you understand what I’m saying when I tell you about my work. You don’t think my pursuits are ridiculous. I even tolerate, with some enjoyment, your biting sarcasm and amusing observations...”

“I’m going to come right here and now if you don’t stop talking about how wonderful I am.” He murmured against her breasts, and she gave a snort of amusement.

“You’d better not, it would be a waste, don’t you think?” She pulled him up from her chest, kissed him then, and it went on for a while. Self-control wasn’t an infinite resource for either of them, though, and both were breathing a little harder when they came up for air.

“Is this all you came here for? To tell me nice things and sit in my lap?”

“Not really. There was a serious purpose, as there always is, which you distracted me from, as you always do.”

“I didn’t *ask* you to interrupt my work and crawl up in my lap.”

“I suppose that’s fair.” Grace conceded.

“Though I will regret asking...what *serious purpose* are you here for?”

“Well, my time and yours are valuable, it seems stupid to waste it quibbling about things that don’t matter, don’t you think? If you want to argue and debate academia, then I am more than happy to do so. But this nonsense about the past and things not even pertinent to what’s happening now can’t go on. It’s ridiculous.”

“There *is* a way to clear up all the confusion, you know.”

“What confusion? What is there about me being here with you that is at *all* unclear?” She knew what he was suggesting, and the very thought of it was far more terrifying than facing an entire squadron of centurions in some ruin.

“There’s nothing stopping you from going back to Nibenay and leaving the city behind.” *Him*, he meant. Leave *him* behind.

“Is that what you’re afraid of?” Lightly, one hand tangled in Abnur’s hair, and she could see his jaw clench and unclench as he resisted the urge to tell her what a stupid assumption it was to think he feared anything.

“I would prefer it if you did not do that.” He shifted uncomfortably, no doubt squirming at the prospect of this awful discussion about *feelings*. Those useless things Grace was finding to be less useless than she’d always touted. For, what worthwhile reward was ever claimed where no risk was taken?

"If I did not do what?"

"Return to Nibenay." He seemed displeased to be forced into using his words. Grace did her best to quell her amusement.

"So, you would suggest the *chains* of wedlock to prevent my untimely departure? That's not a good reason at all." A small, almost sad smile crossed her lips as she shook her head. "I've never wanted to marry anyone. I certainly won't do it just to make you feel like I won't run off."

"What reason would you approve of, then? *Love*?" Abnur uttered the word with a derisive scoff, as if even saying it was poisonous. Not that she could blame him.

"Peasants marry for love. We are nobility, we marry for contracts and political advancement. We marry for what the union will gain us. We marry for power. We don't get to marry for something as silly and fleeting as sentiment." In the deepest, darkest parts of her, she very quietly envied the folk with simpler lives for their freedom to *feel*. "This, whatever it is, isn't any of those things. Besides a sense of security, you would gain nothing from me being your wife, which sounds dangerously like peasants, does it not?"

"And *you* are concerned about being compared to the low-born?" He scoffed.

"No, but you are." Grace put her arms around his neck again. "What *I* am concerned about is my identity disappearing. Gratiaren Tiradia, the scholar, Dwemer enthusiast, headstrong troublemaker, battlemage dropout, and secret half-mer would vanish, and all that would be left is Abnur Tharn's wife. I'm not willing to give up who I am to be recognized for that instead."

"I suppose I cannot argue that logic. What's to be done, then?"

"Something much more difficult than matrimonial enslavement." It was strange to have this sort of conversation with him. It seemed only late at night with no one to witness was the only time Abnur Tharn could talk about such matters.

"And what is that?"

"Trust me."

"You're right, that's much more difficult than marriage, considering I never trusted my wives. But then, one or two did plot against me. Much to their detriment."

"You've trusted me with dangerous information, which I appreciate. So, surely you can also believe that nuptial bonds aren't necessary."

"Fair enough." Abnur nodded. "Anything else to address before I meet my limit for serious and meaningful discussions which will never be mentioned again?"

"Well, your awful daughter so kindly reminded me last night that I am naught but your plaything, but I suppose that opinion is unfounded in light of the discussion we've just had."

"My awful daughter, however successful in her ambitions, has the emotional complexity of dog shit."

"Obviously."

"Then why bring it up if you know better than to give credence to her words?"

“You’ve *told* her all about me. The duke, what happened, what you did to him...everything.”

“Not *everything*.” Abnur kissed her, and she inhaled sharply as it became apparent that this discussion had come to a close. It was enough, though, she had the answers to the questions she didn’t even dare ask herself.

Grace moved and looked down at Abnur’s desk and all the items on it. Seemed a lot to just shove to the floor. Knowing her as he did, he took her by the waist, interrupting the thought.

“No, not here.” He shook his head, eyes trailing from her face to her partially undone shirt and back up again. “Not on a hard surface. Virility aside, I am an *old* man, as you so tactfully pointed out.” A sly smirk crossed his lips. “No, I will lay you down somewhere soft. In our bed.” He kissed her neck, and she put her head back, closing her eyes. Something poked at her brain, but she didn’t know what. “There, I will peel off your ridiculous clothes.”

“And just what is so ridiculous about them?”

“They’re practically impossible to get into!” Abnur tugged on her trousers, and she couldn’t help but grin.

“Very well, I accept that. Go on.” Her eyes were on his, her pulse going faster.

“I didn’t realize verbalizing such intent titillated you. I’ll make note of that.” He continued, though. “I’ll put my hands on you, I know how you like that, to touch every part and feel you trembling under my fingers. I will run my tongue over your skin, wrap my lips around each nipple and suck till they’re as hard as I am.” His smile was wicked, he knew how he affected her. Grace’s chest was heaving, even from words alone. “I’m going to press your thighs apart, running my tongue against your sweet, salty flesh.” Suddenly his hand slid between her legs, cupping her. “You’re wet already, I can tell. It’s almost coming through.”

“Of course, I am, you evil bastard.” She panted. Abnur chuckled, though, and continued.

“I’ll finish you the first time with just my mouth, then I’ll use my fingers, too. And I know just which spot you like, the one that makes you shake and buck your hips and *scream*. I’ll take as long as I have to, and I won’t stop till the sheets are soaked.”

Grace could scarcely breathe, squeezing his hand where it was still pressed against her. She was already shivering in anticipation.

“Then what?” She closed her eyes as the ache grew stronger, and his lips moved along her throat.

“Then, finally, I will bury my cock inside you.” His teeth grazed her skin then lightly bit her ear. “To feel the way you squeeze around me, and hear those desperate sounds you make, oh and when you *beg*.” His breath was coming faster, too, and the physical manifestation of his excitement was pressing up against her. “So,” His tunic was bunched in her fists, and she made a sound of acknowledgment. “Will you want me to fuck you or make love to you?”

“Fuck me,” She kissed him roughly, but only briefly. “*Then* make love to me.”

“Mm, very well.” He nodded. “Do you know what else is so interesting about you?”

“What?” She blinked, only barely coherent enough to string thoughts together.

“How easily you come for me.”

“Well, I...” It was impossible to finish the sentence as his fingers pressed rhythmically against her through the fabric. With the barest of effort, as she was so worked up, he got the desired result, and she gasped.

“You see?” He chuckled, and she heard a portal open. “We’ve got more work to do, and no time for stairs.”

Not To Be Trifled With

31st of Frostfall, Fredas (Finally.)

Grace looked nervous, Tharn thought. Or perhaps just very focused, it was difficult to tell when she was being twitchy like this. He knew, though, that she was running every line, every fact, every word through her mind, checking and rechecking it. But he wasn't worried. For someone who despised doing presentations or speaking to groups, she was quite good at it. In this case, he knew all she needed was to get angry enough. That idiot baron, Morus Gallucia, would only have to open his mouth for a sentence or two, no doubt, and that would serve well enough to stoke the fires of her fury. Though, hopefully, those were the only fires; it would not do to set anything ablaze today.

"I don't see why I have to be there for the *entire* day when the case I'm to speak at is at the very end." She complained, *again*, for probably the fifth time inside two hours.

"Were you merely watching, you could show up for just that hearing. But, as a participant, and therefore a contributor to the amount of time we all have to be there, you must sit and suffer with the rest of us."

"That's a stupid, sadistic rule. Did *you* come up with it?" Grace crossed her arms, unhappy.

"No, but I applaud whoever did."

It was going to be a long day. There seemed to be more on the schedule than was typical, and there were definitely many more spectators than usual. Decir had been keeping tabs on the status of the rumor mill, and it had spread like wildfire just who exactly was going to be standing in front of everyone arguing against the Dwemer Material Reclamation Proposal, as it was being called.

Tharn had successfully shielded Grace from the majority of public intrigue she generated by choosing to be at the White-Gold Tower at all...with him. There would come a day when she realized she was a significant topic of conversation amongst the nobility as well as how much he'd done to keep it from affecting her. Though he'd certainly not be the one to tell her.

The chamber which housed the Common Court was large and rectangular. The councilmembers unfortunate enough to be forced to attend sat in four-tiered rows at the front with Tharn in the first at the center. Rows of seating lined the other three walls except for the aisles to the exits and the small section reserved from those who had business with the Court. Every seat in the place was full, and those who could not sit were standing.

Grace was off in the petitioner section, carefully positioned as far from Baron Gallucia as possible, which was for the best. She looked especially studious, with her hair piled back and up in an intricate sort of style. She obviously hired someone professional because her little maid wasn't *that* talented. He'd watched her dress that morning in tight black trousers, knee-high, high-heeled leather boots, a white shirt, and over it, a dark red coat that hugged her form to her hips where it hung knee-length. It was quite nice, actually. He liked her in red, any shade of it, and the sleeves and collar had a very subtle Imperial Diamond motif.

So focused was Grace, that she hadn't noticed when Silero and her mother arrived and took their

reserved seats. Tharn had all but ordered Silero to come. With so few genuine intellectuals in the family, they'd never fully understood Grace's scholarly pursuits or her fascination with the Dwemer, which definitely bordered on obsession. She'd lamented on more than one occasion about their seeming embarrassment by her. Silero knew, to some degree. At some point, he'd given up on the idea of his granddaughter being any sort of lady in the traditional sense and let her do what she wanted. It was Grace's hysterical mother who was the problem these days, for a multitude of reasons. Unfortunately, Silero had seen fit to bring her along.

The morning was tedious, and the mid-day break was brief. Most used it to stretch their legs. Tharn had no doubt that Grace spent it flipping through various texts to double-check details she was agonizing over and nitpicking. Once the Court reconvened, it was another two hours before, at long last, the final case was up.

It was almost shocking how silent the chamber became as Baron Gallucia took his place at the petitioner podium and Grace went to the other, as the opposition. He looked smug and overdressed, and had brought no notes or materials at all to refer to. Grace was armed with a large stack of documents, two books, and a look in her eye that suggested she was entirely capable of ripping a man's throat out with her teeth.

There was a long stretch of silence as they all stared at one another until Tharn rolled his eyes, letting out an irritated sigh.

"State your name and purpose for seeking an audience with us." He inclined his head toward the baron.

"I am Baron Morus Gallucia. I sit at the head of a very lucrative business specializing in the reclamation and acquisition of unwanted materials. I would like to thank you for this opportunity..."

"We requested your purpose for coming today, don't waste the little time you have been given with superfluous elaboration." Tharn interrupted.

"Apologies, Chancellor Tharn." Gallucia shifted a little uncomfortably but regained his posture and cleared his throat. "As you of course know, there is no metal that can be forged today that comes anywhere close to that which was produced by the dwarves. Dwarven weapons and armor are highly prized items for their strength and durability."

"What is your proposal, Baron, or will you simply keep telling us things we already know?" One of the more impatient councilors spoke up, voicing what most were already thinking.

"My company seeks to enter dwarven ruins to reclaim the *endless* supply of metals therein. I've come here to ask for Imperial assistance and support in doing so. We have numerous experienced men who have been inside such ruins who can act as guides."

"And just what benefit is such an endeavor to the Empire?" Councilor Dolia Faleus spoke up. She was a patron to many scholars and would certainly vote against the ridiculous proposal.

"In exchange for the Empire's assistance, we will have our finest blacksmiths working that metal, and, if required, working with the Imperial army's own smiths to help forge armor and weapons to arm our fighters with." The baron looked too sure of himself.

"So..." Councilor Faleus rose to her feet. "What you're *not* saying, is that you would like Imperial *protection* while on these reclamation missions, lest the locals object to the overt invasion of their land and the taking of what really are *their* natural resources by right of territory."

“I would hope, Madam Councilor, that such arrangements could be worked out in a formal agreement upon approval. You will find that we are very amiable to meeting the needs of the Empire.”

“Do you have the necessary documentation for what you’ve told us? Is there a schedule and timeline set out, including rates and how often delivery of goods would be?” The councilor looked down her nose at the baron.

“Absolutely.”

“With you now? I, for one, would like to see such information before so important a decision.” There was a slightly mocking tone in her voice. They’d all noticed, of course, that he’d come to them with *no* materials. His cocksure countenance faltered slightly for the first time.

“I provided all documentation to Chancellor Tharn when the petition was approved to be presented in court, madam...”

"Were they the only copies in existence?"

Gallucia scoffed. "Of course not..."

“So, you believe it is Chancellor Tharn’s responsibility to make your presentation for you?” Councilor Faleus gave a mirthless laugh. Grace maintained an impassive expression, with only the barest twitch of one side of her mouth that no one but Tharn would have caught.

“No, madam, certainly not. I...”

“I have heard enough of this proposition. Whoever wishes to question him next is free to do so.” The councilor took her seat once more, and Tharn could hear some of them murmuring to one another behind him.

“Have *you* any thoughts on the matter?” Councilor Ulbart Parris leaned over and whispered from the left.

“I think it’s a foolhardy endeavor that would cost the Empire much more than we would gain.” He replied quietly.

“Is that what you think, or is there some personal investment in it being voted *no*?” Parris had always been even less fond of Tharn than many others.

“I would think you would be the last man alive who dared to presume such a thing, considering the events which transpired three months ago.” The look Tharn gave him would have made most men loose their bowels. Parris harrumphed and rose to his feet.

“So, you say that you’d provide ample amounts of valuable dwarven alloys to the Empire?” The haughty tone of his voice echoed in the room.

“Yes, councilor.” Gallucia nodded. “I am positive the Imperial weaponsmiths would be very pleased to have such metals to work with.”

“And these materials would be given in payment to the Empire, for our support?”

“Well, we are prepared to offer them at a very generous discount, of course, but my business is still a business. When you read the proposal, you will see the benefits outlined perfectly.” The Baron smiled. Even Ulbart Parris couldn’t be *that* stupid.

"I would have hoped that in order to win a vote of approval, you'd have outlined the specifics of these benefits for us here and now." Parris gave a small sigh and sat back down.

"I, for one, think it *would* be beneficial to arm our legion with weapons and armor that have the integrity of dwarven alloys." One of the other men seated behind Tharn called. A woman near him said something in agreement, and there were murmurs throughout.

"Is your proposition complete, Baron Gallucia?" Tharn asked. "Since you did not bring your materials, I am not sure what more you might offer would be relevant, factual, or anything beyond conjecture."

"My lord, I feel the proposition speaks for itself." Gallucia puffed up his chest.

"Well, it would have, had you brought it."

"Sir, I..."

"We will hear from the opposition now." Tharn nodded to Grace. "State your name, credentials, and reasons for being here today."

"I am Gratiaren Tiradia. Presently, I am an archival resident here in the midst of research regarding the Dwemer, or dwarves as they are often called. I have many papers published regarding various areas of study in Dwemer technology, including Dwemeris translation, automatons, the use of steam as a means of power, metallurgy, and tonal architecture. There are many other areas of study in which I am proficient, but they are not relevant to this case." She spoke with confidence, and though she likely didn't know it, she commanded the attention of every person in the room. It wasn't just because of who she was, but her presence was much more than she ever gave herself credit for. She'd have made a very proficient Magus General.

"The daughter of Governor Silero Tiradia?" A younger man called Silvae Cressius, who had only recently inherited his seat on the council from his deceased father, stood up.

"How exactly is that pertinent to the case at hand, Councilor?" Grace asked him without even hesitating. "At least in the case of academics, to my knowledge, family name is irrelevant, and our *merit* is what gains us our standing. I've given *my* credentials." Ha, she knew who the whelp was, and Tharn couldn't think of a better way to put the young councilor in his place. There was a ripple of quiet tittering throughout the crowd, and Tharn could see the broad grin on Silero's face.

"Disrespecting the very council that you're seeking to convince to vote against me?" Baron Gallucia scoffed.

"You've had *your* opportunity to speak, Baron. Do shut up." She cast him a level look, and the shock alone at her directness silenced him. There was more quiet chuckling and the sound of a badly masked laugh from Silero, whose daughter elbowed him sharply, and he covered the noise with a cough. Grace paused, then her head turned slightly in the direction of her grandfather. She'd recognized the sound. Damn! Her eyes found Tharn's and briefly narrowed at him.

"If the bickering is *finished*, Lady Tiradia, what is your purpose here?" Tharn's voice cut through the snickering, and silence again fell.

"I would like to present evidence to argue against Baron Gallucia's proposition, his request for Imperial aid to strip down Dwemer ruins for the purposes of selling the materials." Her eyes moved over the faces of the councilors, and she was careful not to look long at Tharn.

"Proceed." He nodded again.

“As you all well know, there are no Dwemer ruins within the currently protected borders of Cyrodiil. To embark on these excursions to retrieve the materials from their ruins would mean taking valuable Imperial resources away from Cyrodiil and out into lands where the political state is tumultuous at best. Already, High Rock, Hammerfell, and the Orsimer have formed the Daggerfall Covenant, and a great many Dwemer ruins lie within their territory. So, then Skyrim and Morrowind are the remaining regions with the highest concentration of viable ruins. We’ve held a precarious treaty with Morrowind, at best, for the last several centuries. To provoke them by sending Imperial legionnaires into their lands would definitely *not* be in our best interest. That leaves Skyrim, a realm split in half because they cannot agree on anything. Do you not think that they would set their differences aside to join forces to expel what might be perceived as the beginning of an Imperial invasion? And what then? Do they begin preparing for war they think we started? Do they join up with Daggerfall or maybe give Morrowind a reason to push the borders again?”

“I presume you have *other* reasons you oppose the proposition?” Ulbart Parris drawled.

“I do, Councilor. Let us theorize, shall we? What would happen in a perfect world where crossing borders was *not* taken as an act of aggression? The baron’s allegedly seasoned explorers of Dwemer ruins enter a site, *our* soldiers at their back, only to be met with what still dwells within most Dwemer facilities. Dwemer automatons operate to this day within their ruins, councilors. These are *machines* designed to defend and to fight. They are made of metal, they cannot feel pain; they do not stop. Ten men could not stop twenty Dwemer spiders or spheres, and the centurions are the height of two men with the strength of a hundred. Such things will rip these men apart, I have *seen* them with my own eyes.” Grace continued.

“And here you are, unharmed.” Silvae Cressius quipped, still smarting, no doubt from what she said earlier.

“Yes, well, I’m a good deal more intelligent than your average soldier, and certainly, my intellect reaches far beyond anyone willing to be employed by a man with such questionable business practices.” She smirked, her eyes flicking to Tharn, who found himself smiling, but then quickly sobered. “For every person who has gone into a Dwemer ruin and come out, there are at least five who went in and did not.”

“Alright, so there is *danger* in these ruins, and a risk of political consequences, which I cannot imagine, with your nose in books all day, that you have any *real* knowledge of...” Parris rolled his eyes.

“Do *not* presume to tell me what I do and do not know, my lord. It is a wonder you keep your post if you are so inclined to disparage those who come here in accordance with the law as is our right.” Her anger was growing more apparent, and Tharn wasn’t sure if he was more concerned or entertained by it. It was always a joy to witness her rage when it *wasn’t* directed at him.

“I have heard rumor, Lady Tiradia, that you were not to be trifled with.” Councilor Broscus Blonius chuckled, but she was having none of it.

“It is no rumor, my lord, it is a fact. If we could please proceed, my time is no less valuable than your own.” Her hands were clasped behind her back.

“Please continue, Lady Tiradia,” Tharn called.

“If the potential for war and the certainty of dead Imperial warriors is not convincing enough for you, then perhaps some facts regarding Dwemer metallurgy might.” She turned one of the pages in front of her, glancing only briefly at it. “I do not dispute the claims regarding the quality of

Dwemer armor and weapons. It's been nearly twenty-eight *hundred* years since their disappearance, and still, such artifacts are nearly priceless for their endurance over time." She paused as if daring anyone to make a remark. "The fact of the matter is that if all the metal in one ruin was extracted and sold to us, the Empire will have lost many soldiers and have only a heap of scrap metal to show for it. The process to forge weapons was very different from that which was used in their architecture. I have seen a Dwemer forge, and I've examined armor, weapons, automaton components, as well as pieces of their building materials. Each alloy composition is forged differently with tools, heat, and magic that we cannot even possibly fathom. If you buy Dwemer scrap from Baron Gallucia, you will have been played for fools because it will gain the Empire nothing. It is a scam to make money, and a dangerous one at that."

"You are a fierce opponent and a passionate scholar, Lady Tiradia." Councilor Dolia Faleus rose again. "I have read some of your papers and even the analyses done on them afterward. Only a fool would not recognize the importance of Dwemer technology. If you oppose breaking down their pieces and selling them, what do you propose is done instead?"

"I would propose better funding for research and proper training for those who would seek to enter a ruin. Already my private research has yielded results. I have built and used, with success, a device that works to protect the wearer from the automatons that roam the facilities." The excited glint that Grace got in her eye when talking about her work appeared.

"I've never heard of such a thing before..." Councilor Faleus frowned.

"Naturally, since no one else has done it." Grace shrugged.

"Do you have documentation and evidence of this device's utility?"

"Yes, of course." Ever prepared, Grace began flipping through some of the pages in front of her. Tharn decided it was a safe enough topic to speak up on.

"The devices do work, councilor, to a point. I wore one myself some weeks ago when entering such a facility. They are rudimentary in their current stage of development, but impressive nevertheless considering no other thing made by man or mer has ever successfully repelled the automatons." He explained.

"Very interesting, Chancellor, thank you. Lady Tiradia, I would be interested in learning more about these. I believe many on this council would agree that such knowledge is invaluable."

"Yes, of course, councilor." Grace nodded.

"Are your arguments complete, Lady Tiradia, or is there something further to add?" Tharn asked her.

"That is all, Chancellor. Thank you."

"Baron Gallucia, do you have any answer to the statements Lady Tiradia has made in her rebuttal to your proposal?" He hated to ask, but it was the proper procedure. Tharn knew that this was where the ugliness would be. Small men with small minds always lashed out.

"This is a farce, an absolute farce." The baron shook his head. "You expect me to believe this is a fair vote when the person arguing against my very reasonable petition spends her free time polishing the chancellor's knob?" There was a collective gasp and then whispering amongst the spectators.

"You are *out* of line, Baron Gallucia." Councilor Faleus growled. "If you wish this proposal to go

to vote at all, you will hold your tongue and show proper respect to your betters.”

“Councilor Faleus, I recuse myself from the vote. Just get it over with.” Tharn rolled his eyes, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

“Very well.” She nodded. “Is the Elder Council ready to vote?” There were affirmative nods and noises. “All in favor of granting Baron Gallucia support to strip down Dwemer ruins?” Probably fewer than a quarter of the councilmembers raised their hands. “All in favor of *not* granting support?” Everyone else raised their hand, and a delighted smile bloomed across Grace’s face, her eyes meeting his. Tharn gave her a small nod, one side of his mouth curled upward against his will.

The baron, on the other hand, was glowering, and he turned to his opponent, a dangerous look in his eyes.

“Baron Gallucia, your request is denied, and as such, it cannot be resubmitted for vote or review again. With that, this session of the Common Court is closed.” Tharn announced, not at all surprised by the outcome.

Immediately conversation broke out across the spectators as they all cast glances at Grace and then Tharn. He’d expected nothing less and was impressed that she hadn’t even reacted to the Baron’s scurrilous accusation.

No one had moved to leave yet, as it was always the councilmembers who were first to go, and Tharn watched as Gallucia made his way toward Grace. The show, apparently not over yet, drew the silence and attention from the crowd.

“Do you really think this has saved your precious ruins?” The baron loomed over her, and when Grace smiled at the fuming brute, Tharn rose to his feet, prepared to intervene. Some things were easier to sweep beneath a rug than others, publicly immolating a man was not one of them. “I can *buy* mercenaries with the money I will save not having to turn over discounted materials to the Empire.”

“Baron Gallucia, you can’t *buy* anything with your assets seized.” She gave a laugh, and Gallucia blinked, confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Let’s see, it is well after four o’clock, so, I expect by now that the city magistrate has been in possession of your properties, all the goods in your warehouses, and many of your management staff detained for at least the last three hours.” She looked him squarely in the eye, unflinching.

“You’re lying, that’s impossible...” Gallucia scoffed, glancing around nervously.

“Well, provided with plentiful evidence of tax evasion, smuggling, *piracy*, and a good deal of other heinous crimes, the magistrate was only too happy to do his duty in apprehending you and your cohorts.” Grace gave a little shrug.

“You can’t do that...” The now furious man snarled at her.

“You broke the law...many of them, in fact. Not only here, but across borders as well. I daresay you will be stripped of every material possession you own to pay back the debts incurred by thievery. Not only that, crimes of such magnitude mean all titles and holdings bestowed upon you by the Empire are forfeit.” Her smile was positively diabolical, and Tharn thought the baron might try to strike her. It would be a grave mistake if he dared.

“If you think you’re going to get away with this...”

“I’m not *getting away* with anything, because *I* haven’t broken the law.” Grace took a step closer to the baron, getting right in his face. “As you heard, I am not to be trifled with. I will never stand idly by as the things I believe in and work hard for are destroyed for profit.” Moving back again, she nodded to the three city guards who were waiting, and they marched forward, grabbing Gallucia, who started struggling.

“You can’t do this!” He screeched and continued shouting it as he was dragged away.

Tharn was shocked, which was rare. He hadn’t the slightest inkling of what Grace had intended and suspected Decir had been involved. He couldn’t have done it better himself, and that was saying something. She looked very pleased with herself, and rightfully so, grinning at him with poorly feigned innocence.

“Court adjourned. The Elder Council is dismissed, everyone is free to go.” Tharn announced, and at once there was the sound of chairs scraping against the floor and the rise of voices as everything they’d just witnessed was discussed.

“Well, that was...unexpected.” He said quietly, approaching as her grin could no longer be suppressed. “Maybe you *are* spending too much time with me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, if I was going to do it your way, I’d have had him dragged from his bed and beaten last night so that he never even made it to court.” She stepped closer to him.

“Fair point.” He was proud of her, a strange sensation, stranger even than other things. And he wasn’t even sure how to express it, which was an unfortunate side effect of being almost perpetually disappointed in everyone. Tharn leaned closer so as to not be overheard. “Later, I will show my appreciation for your excellent work, but you have to wear those boots.”

“And nothing else, I presume.”

“Naturally.” He smirked, and as she was about to make another remark, Tharn saw Silero approach from behind Grace.

“There you are!” He announced his presence, and she nearly leapt out of her skin, whirling around.

“What are you doing here?” She gaped at her grandfather.

“We were invited, of course.” Silero smiled and shook Tharn’s hand. “Hello, chancellor.”

“Silero.” He gave a nod.

“Bastard,” Grace muttered, shooting him a look over one shoulder. Her mother appeared at Silero’s side then, looking very disgruntled.

“That was quite an impressive display, Grace.” Silero watched his granddaughter, pride in his eyes, and she merely shrugged, her ears turning red.

“I didn’t realize it was going to turn into such a...thing.”

“*Impressive?*” Juri Tiradia suddenly hissed. She looked ready to burst into tears. “What happened to my...to the kind, compassionate person you were? You’re turning into *him*.” Without further elaboration, she turned on her heel and stormed away. Silero gave a heavy sigh.

Grace just shook her head. “Ah, fuck.”

Family Matters

31st of Frostfall – Cont.

Nothing was ever easy where her mother was concerned. Grace sighed, watching Juri storm off, no doubt to get lost somewhere in the palace. She'd never really learned her way around.

"I wish I could say this was the first parade of mine she's rained on." Grace shook her head. She loved her mother, honestly, but the woman was exhausting.

"Well, you know how she is." Silero looked a little apologetic.

"Yes, and more often than not, it seems I am the adult, and *she* is the child."

"You'd better go wrangle this family matter that I thankfully need to be no part of. I've got a fellow councilmember to have words with." Abnur had an odd sort of look in his eye as he touched her shoulder.

"Oh? Which one? And why?" She grinned suddenly, always interested in the sordid things he often held over the heads of various Elder Council members.

"I'll tell you later." He arched a brow.

"It's that Parris person, isn't it?" She asked, lowering her voice.

"You're too smart for your own good." Abnur made an amused noise. "Once you've dealt with your...situation, bring them back to the apartment. The guest rooms have been made ready."

"They...have?" Grace stared, more than a little uncomfortable with the idea of her immediate family staying in close proximity to where they...slept.

"Yes, for the sake of simplicity. Also, I've invited Agrilius and...his son, to dine with us tonight as well." He went on.

She blanched. "*Why* are you like this?" Unsurprisingly, he looked that much more amused.

"Do you mean Agrilius Philellian?" Her grandfather spoke up.

"Yes, he and Tal are visiting at my behest as we've recently come into possession of some very valuable Dwemer books." Grace was mildly concerned there might be some lecture in store for her once she and Silero were alone. It was growing more frustrating that her own family seemed to so readily forget that she was, in fact, an adult.

"Don't worry, I'll be on my best behavior," Abnur promised. His sincerity was highly debatable at that moment, though. "I'll make every effort not to antagonize either your mother or The No— ... Agrilius's son."

"Mmhm, we'll see." She turned to walk away, but he caught her hand very briefly, then let go, and her heart gave a weird little thump. When she saw that Silero had not missed the exchange, her ears grew hot. "We need to find Juri before she gets lost or into trouble." Giving her guards a nod, Grace started off toward the exit, her grandfather at her side. He glanced back at the guards,

though, with a bit of a frown.

“You have your own escort now?”

“Yes, I’ll have to explain later.” Now certainly wasn’t the time for it. All three were on duty presently, due to the chaotic nature of a hearing and the palace being bustling with an overabundance of public. Grace eyed her grandfather warily, looking for the vein on the side of his head to be throbbing, but instead, he seemed perfectly fine. “You’re behaving rather...calmly. All things considered.”

“We’re all adults here, aren’t we, Gratiaren?”

“Well, you’ve just called me by my full name, so I assume *something* is amiss. Out with it, before we have to deal with another chapter of *The Hysterics of Juri Tiradia*.” Grace stopped and gave him a level look. He’d been silently annoyed with her familiarity with Abnur for *years*. While the news of her involvement with Abnur Tharn probably blindsided and shocked her mother and grandmother, it seemed highly unlikely that Silero was *actually* surprised.

Her grandfather heaved an enormous sigh and sat down on a bench at the side of the corridor. The section they were in was largely empty, at least, so gawking was minimal. Grace sat beside him, and he simply looked at her for a long moment, a sort of wistful expression on his face. Unlike many Imperials, he wore a bushy beard, and despite his age, neither it nor his hair was *all* gray.

“Parents, well, and grandparents, I suppose, aren’t *supposed* to have favorites, you know.” He gave a quiet laugh. “But...you’re mine. Have been since you came screaming into the world covered in blood, and your grandmother smacked me when I said hopefully you didn’t leave the world the same way.”

“If you knew that early on, you’re lucky, I suppose, that I didn’t turn out stupid.”

“Ah, smarts have nothing to do with it.” He shook his head. “My older children married the way most nobles do, and none were pleased about it. No one ever really is, and if they are, it’s not until later. I got lucky that I came to love your nan. Juri was headstrong and wild, unlike any of the others. Not a one of us was surprised when she said she was having a Dunmer’s child.” Silero chuckled then, and Grace shook her head.

“I have a hard time thinking of her being wild. She’s got a bit of a stick up her ass these days.”

“Time changes us all. You were afraid of your own shadow when you were very small. I mean, that didn’t last long, and you were terrifying all of us shortly thereafter, but...she grew in a different direction is all.” He sat back with a small, dismissive wave. “Anyway, what I was getting at is that I’d always wanted you to have exactly what you wanted. I’d hoped you’d have all the experiences most other noble-born don’t. Things like love.”

“Well, many of them do experience *love*. Extra-martially, of course, but they do experience it.” She squirmed a little, as she always did during any sort of heartfelt moment.

“Still making jokes about serious things, eh?”

“Yes, forever and always and much to my detriment, I’m sure.” Grace nodded. “Some things just cannot be helped.” He smiled, shaking his head.

“You’ve always run your mouth and been the smartest person in the room...and known it. I suppose it’s no wonder you’d be drawn to a man like Tharn. Gods, it’s *killed* me for years to see the similarities between you, except for the fact that you’re kind and understanding where he’s an

unfeeling, selfish prick.”

“Seems about right.”

“What a nightmare it was when you set your sights on him as a girl. I’m probably the only man alive who was thrilled when his daughter, or granddaughter...well...” He shifted uncomfortably, making a small vague gesture.

“Grew up?” She offered tactfully. “With...those other than *him*, you mean?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Silero cleared his throat. “I have to know, and tell me the truth, Grace, when you were still a girl and in the midst of your infatuation...did he ever...”

“Gods, no! Whatever you may think of him, he’s certainly not *interested* in adolescents.”

“Oh, good.” He let out a long, relieved breath.

“There’s been at least a good decade or more of intermittent cat and mouse. But that is neither here nor there.”

“I’d begrudgingly accepted things when the news came. I figured that, as usual, you would do as you will. It wasn’t until today that I realized you’re in love with him. And more shocking still, he with you.”

“Please.” Grace scoffed, shifting where she sat, eyes darting about, worrying that someone might hear her grandfather say such a ridiculous thing. “Don’t be stupid.”

Silero laughed, though. “I’m not going to try to argue you out of your denial. It is what it is.”

“We really should go find Juri before she gets herself hopelessly lost.”

“The color of your face right now tells me everything I need to know.” He nudged her with his elbow but stood up. “My only hope now is that he marries you.”

“He’s already brought it up, and I’ve already told him no.” She gave a smug smile then at the shock on her grandfather’s face and started down the corridor once more.

Grace found her mother sitting in an alcove alone, looking distraught. Silero urged her on and kept back, which was a tad annoying since it was usually more comfortable to have him as a buffer when Juri was in the midst of such a meltdown.

“Mother...” She sighed and sat beside Juri. “What’s really the problem?”

“He’s a horrible person, Gratiaren. How can you sell yourself to him?” Her mother hissed. Her eyes were a little red.

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“I think you care for him, and that it’s a futile effort to hope he might somehow decide to reciprocate such feelings.” Juri dabbed at her eyes.

“He *does* care for me.” Somehow, it wasn’t difficult to admit it to her mother, especially if it soothed her concerns. It was strange to say it aloud, nevertheless. Grace quite liked spending time with Juri when she wasn’t upset over things.

“I used to think the same thing about your father. I had hoped for so long...” Her lower lip quivered, and it seemed like she was about to go to pieces again. Grace stared though in complete confusion.

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, *what am I talking about?* I wrote to him for *years*, and he never answered!”

“Every time I’ve seen him, throughout my *entire* life, Nevalo has asked about you and if I knew why you never replied to *his* letters. I assumed you wanted nothing to do with him, and you never told me otherwise, so...” Grace frowned.

“*What?* How? I always sent...there were...” Juri blinked. “Who would...?” In unison, they turned and looked to where Silero stood, waiting patiently. Upon noticing two sets of angry eyes fixed on him, he looked decidedly less comfortable.

“There’s got to be a way to fix this, mother.” Grace wondered if she’d inadvertently begun a feud between her mother and grandfather. It hadn’t been her intent, of course, but how could she have known what he’d done?

“It’s probably too late. I am old now...” Juri shook her head sadly, and it tore at Grace to think that the last thirty-five years, her mother might have been happy rather than sad and neurotic.

“Don’t think like that; you’ve always been beautiful. Come on, let’s get you back up to Abnur’s apartment. The guest rooms are very nice, you can relax, and we’ll sort things out.” Grace got to her feet, and Juri followed, glaring at her father.

“How could you?” She hissed.

“Juri, I...”

“Shh, let’s get upstairs first, yes?” Grace urged, glancing about at the various sets of eyes trained in their direction.

The main entry door slammed, nearly shaking the walls, and Nalea, who was waiting for them, looked very startled. She didn’t have time to greet them before the fury erupted.

“How could you keep those letters from me? How *dare* you?!” Juri shrieked at Silero.

“You have to understand, Juri, you couldn’t just...”

“Just *what*, father? I couldn’t *just* marry the man I wanted, that I *loved*...**THAT I HAVE A CHILD WITH?!?**”

“Clever. If she’s furious with him, she won’t be so inclined to take her hatred of me out on you.” Abnur murmured, sidling up as they watched Silero and Juri shout at each other.

“That wasn’t my intent, but it does serve that purpose, I suppose,” Grace smirked, then turned to him, smoothing his tunic, her hands sliding up his chest.

“Uh oh. I know that look.” He narrowed his eyes at her, and she smiled prettily.

“I have a favor to ask.”

It had taken some effort, but Grace was finally able to calm her mother down enough to agree to go take a bath and relax before dinner. She sent Hester to take care of Juri and then went to talk with Silero. She found him in Abnur's study, a drink in his hand as he stared out the window. The vein on the side of his head was definitely throbbing now.

"Thirty-five years is a long time." She stepped up beside him, and he said nothing. "On one hand, in terms of maintaining that delicate image to Nibinese and Imperial society alike, I see why you did something so stupid and cruel, but on the other...she is your daughter, one who had that chance at love you were *just* telling me about."

"Don't judge me, Gratiaren." He growled.

"Don't judge you? She's been a miserable nightmare for three and a half decades, led to believe the person she loved had fucked her and tossed her aside like a used toy. Did you never think of that? What allowing such horrible beliefs to perpetuate could do to her?"

"You will not speak to me that way." His jaw clenched and unclenched, but it was guilt and anger at himself etched into his face.

"I think today proved well enough that I will speak to anyone whatever way I see fit, grandfather. You're just lucky there is still time to make things right." She clapped a hand on his shoulder, and he frowned down at her.

"Just how am I supposed to do that? She's never going to forgive me."

"Well, you've got ample time to think about it, it would seem." She smiled. "Dinner will certainly be a delight, I'm sure." Silero looked worried, and rightfully so.

Wearing nothing but her shirt, Grace was sprawled across the bed, ankles hanging over Abnur's side, and had been that way for at least the last half hour. *One* day, she wanted just one day where nothing happened. A glorious, fantastic, boring day where no one wanted anything, and no crises required averting. She needed to decompress and started imagining just what that little trip to the Topal Bay would be like. Warm air, salty sea breeze, the sun shining every day.

The door in the sitting room opened and closed quietly. Abnur was back from his errand; maybe he'd want to lie here a bit, too, and tell her about this holiday seed he'd planted in her brain. However, the distinct sound of a belt hitting the floor, a whisper of fabric, and the thud of boots implied he had something else in mind.

The theory was confirmed as Abnur grabbed her by the ankles and pulled her to the edge. She sat up, noting his nakedness and, with an impish grin, didn't let him kiss her. Without hesitation, he pulled open her shirt, sending the buttons flying.

"Abnur! I don't have many of these, you brute."

"I will buy you more." He shoved it down her shoulders and flung it to the floor. "Now, turn over."

“Tomorrow, I need to get some *actual* work done,” Grace muttered, hastily responding to correspondence while seated at Abnur’s desk. She’d been falling behind as of late.

“I have some news. Decir caught me on my way in.”

She looked up. “That is not your good-news-face.”

“Emedia Audtidenius has returned from wherever she’d gone. He asked if he should detain her.” Abnur watched her, carefully gauging her reaction.

“Not yet.” She tried to resist the scowl that twisted her lips. “With the matter of Clivia wanting her gone, I refuse to make it look like I took anything she said to heart.”

“Clivia?” Abnur frowned. Grace had forgotten to mention that particular detail.

“Ah, yes. When she came to my office the night of the *last* dinner we had. She insulted me, presented me with what she believed to be evidence of Emedia’s involvement in the duke incident, and confided that my nemesis has been sleeping with Leovic.”

“Clivia doesn’t even sleep with him, what does it matter?”

“I said the same thing, but your daughter seems to think that Emedia seeks to dethrone her despite her low birth. The emperor is a moron, but I can’t imagine he’d do anything quite that stupid.”

“You’d be surprised.” Abnur glowered a little, but changed the subject. “Any idea how long your *guests* intend to stay?”

“The ones I invited or the ones *you* invited?” Grace gave him a wry look, then heard the front door. “By the sounds of it, they’ve just arrived.” Putting down the pen, she got to her feet and breezed by Abnur, smoothing her skirt, and headed out the door to meet Aggy and Tal as they arrived.

“YOU DID MARVELOUS!” The diminutive scholar beamed the instant he saw her.

“Thank you. I doubt I’ll be able to stop every fool who thinks to do the same thing he wanted, but I will try when I can.” She grinned. “So, if you thought dinner last time was entertaining, you’re in for a treat tonight.”

“That glint in your eye never means anything good, Spitfire.” Tal shook his head but smiled.

“Well, my mother and grandfather are here to dine with us as well.” She grinned.

“Gods help us.” His perfect brown eyes widened.

Abnur looked deeply unhappy, but as this was all his doing, Grace had little sympathy. Six people stood in the parlor with only Aggy’s storytelling to keep anyone focused while they waited for dinner to be ready. Juri was to her right, Abnur to her left, and Tal to Juri’s right. Juri seemed to have barely pulled herself together.

“If I ever somehow manage to lapse once more into the temporary insanity that allowed this nightmare to come to fruition, do remind me of this, possibly accompanied by a strong slap to the face, so my senses return.” Abnur murmured, close to Grace’s ear.

“Gladly. My only reprieve is that your suffering is your own doing. Let that be a lesson.” She gave a snort then heard the sound of murmured voices outside the parlor. Pointedly, she looked up at

Abnur, who reached over and neatly plucked the wineglass from Juri's hand.

“What...what are you doing?” Her mother blinked, looking very affronted. Grace frowned slightly, confused by the gesture.

“Apologies for my lateness...” A deep, smooth voice greeted from the doorway. Juri gave an audible gasp, clasping both hands over her mouth as she stared at the newly arrived guest.

“Ahhh, smart.” Grace nodded at Abnur, understanding.

“You Tiradia women are the bane of good crystal.”

“The last one I broke was *your* fault.”

“Irrelevant.” He stepped forward to greet Grace's father. “Welcome, Nevalo. So glad you could join us.”

“Well, chancellor, your portal certainly expedited things.”

Whiplash

31st of Frostfall Cont.

The silence in the parlor was deafening. Grace decided that perhaps Abnur had indeed rubbed off on her a bit, as she was greatly entertained by the shock and discomfort of the others present. In the grand scheme of things, it was a fairly innocuous situation, so the twinge of guilt she felt was minimal. Silero seemed to be resigned to things as he was, after all, the cause of his own daughter's lifelong misery.

"I was starting to worry you might not be coming, father," Grace spoke up, smiling.

"This is your mischief, isn't it?" He couldn't hide the small sparkle of amusement in his red eyes. In terms of her allegedly bad behavior over the years, he'd always been either a supporter of it, a bad influence, or an active participant.

"Well, I don't know that I'd call it mischief so much as the righting of a colossal wrong." She shrugged and glanced down at her mother, who looked spectacularly frazzled.

"Gratiaren, *what* have you done?" Juri whispered, clutching Grace's sleeve. "I am *old* now, do you really think that he..."

"Juri, I have seen you from afar many times over the years." Nevalo took a step forward, and Grace noticed Aggy all but bouncing up and down with his excitement, a broad grin plastered to his round face. He loved a good love story, the real ones especially. Tal, smirking, put a hand on his adoptive father's shoulder to quell the visible enthusiasm.

"What?" Juri blinked.

"Chancellor Tharn explained the misunderstanding to me..." Nevalo started.

"He *what*?" Grace's mother looked up at Abnur in complete disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that, it wasn't out of the kindness of my heart, believe me." His grimace made that clear enough. "You've been a squawking, suspicious harpy for the whole of your existence. I acted at the request of your daughter as a self-serving gesture in the hopes that maybe now you'll be quiet and stay out of my hair."

"What hair?" Tal scoffed. Abnur firmly ignored him, and Grace bit the insides of her cheeks to keep a rogue giggle at bay, not daring to even so much as glance at Tal. His grin was visible even out the corner of her eye. Abnur would never forgive her if she laughed at him.

"Can we go talk...anywhere else?" Nevalo held his hand out to Juri, who stared blankly at him then looked up at Grace.

"What are you looking at me for?" She laughed, shaking her head. "Go, talk. Use Abnur's study. Or your bedroom, what do I care?" Juri's cheeks turned pink at the implication, looking mildly scandalized. But she took Nevalo's hand and allowed him to lead her out and to the adjacent study. He closed the door behind them but left it cracked an inch or two, naturally, for propriety. As if he, the only person present *older* than Abnur, hadn't fathered a child with Grace's mother at the tender age of fifteen. It certainly hadn't been a shining moment of morality on his part.

“Well,” Abnur took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ve been meaning to replace that sofa.” Grace wrinkled her nose at him.

“Let’s *not* discuss my parents that way, hm?” She squirmed internally but had to admit that if anyone could use a good bedding to calm down, it was her mother. He carefully schooled his face to hide his own amusement, glancing at the three remaining guests.

“It didn’t seem suitable to have a formal dinner, under the circumstances, so there is refreshment laid out in the dining room, should anyone desire it.”

“How *exciting*, you’ve never seen your parents together before, have you?” Aggy sidled up, still grinning, and Grace shook her head.

“No, this is a first.”

“Maybe it will sooth her ire, and she won’t hate me quite as much.” Silero glowered, throwing back his third glass of wine inside of fifteen minutes.

“Chin up, Tiradia. I told the elf it was your idea.” Abnur gave a small shrug, stepping away to the sidebar to set down Juri’s glass and refill his own. Grace stared after him for a moment, not quite sure what to say. “You’re welcome.” He tossed over his shoulder.

“If he keeps this sort of business up, people might start to think he’s a decent human being.” Silero was just as mystified, but eyed his empty glass, no doubt wanting more.

“I’d keep it to myself, if I were you, lest he decide to prove otherwise.” She whispered.

“So,” Tal interjected suddenly. “Are you intentionally deflecting attention from your incredible display today, or is it just habit to lurk in the shadows?”

“I’m not *lurking* anywhere. As for incredible, you’re flattering me. I did little more than my due diligence and my duty as a law-abiding citizen. Not only that, I did it more for myself than anyone else.” She swirled the wine in her glass, shrugging nonchalantly.

“You dismantled his entire operation in one fell swoop.” It seemed Tal was proud of her.

“A man like that wasn’t going to stop just because his proposal was denied. And obviously, a man willing to flout the law is probably already doing so. He certainly didn’t make it difficult. Ignorant criminals are a bit of a bore.”

“You’re going to get a reputation.” Abnur was back at her side.

“I don’t care, as long as it’s better than the one I’ve already got.” She fixed him with a pointed look, and his brows arched high.

“Don’t blame me, it’s not my fault that...”

“It is exactly one *hundred* percent your fault, Abnur.” This conversation was skirting an issue more controversial than Juri’s reunion with Nevalo, and Grace cleared her throat. It was best they *not* discuss things between her and Abnur. “I *am* happy with how things went today, though. One does not fuck with a Tiradia.”

“Wouldn’t you technically be a Terrvos?” Aggy mused.

“Well, yes...and I suppose that name strikes a bit more fear into the hearts of men.” She nodded,

stroking her chin. “Though I’m disinclined to uncover the thirty-five-year lie of my birth, which would risk ridicule from all corners of Cyrodiil. Not to mention, I prefer to be known for my intellect rather than a propensity for torture.”

“House Terrvos hasn’t engaged in any significant torture in nearly a century,” Abnur added with a dismissive wave. “But, I agree you should stick with Tiradia.”

“Really, Tharn?” Tal scoffed. “I’d have expected you to have a different suggestion altogether.” Abnur pinned him with a cold stare.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Faladay.”

“Now, now, children.” Silero rumbled, rolling his eyes, his wineglass mysteriously full again.

“Don’t get *too* drunk. Nan will gut you like a hog.” Grace sighed.

“I think in this instance, she wouldn’t fault me for it.”

It was late, but light still shone from Abnur’s study. Grace pulled her robe a little tighter, very quietly drawing closer. In part, she was curious if her mother and father were still talking, but also she didn’t particularly want to barge in on anything she could never un-see. She could hear them murmuring, though, and her mother laughed suddenly.

It was a strange sound that stopped Grace in her tracks. It had struck her like a blow. When was the last time Juri laughed? For the entire span of her memory, her mother had never been *happy*. Juri had played the part of dutiful daughter and attentive mother, often straying into overprotective. Still, her smiles rarely reached her eyes, a hollowness, and pain that seemed to echo and consume her. But she’d never complained or revealed her true feelings. There had been plenty of dramatic meltdowns and fuss, but never the revelation or discussion of real, underlying emotions and heartbreak.

Grace knocked softly on the study door, which was still slightly ajar, then pushed it open and stepped inside. Juri and Nevalo were sitting close on the couch, both looking toward the door to see just who was intruding on them.

“Oh, good. You’re dressed.” She quipped.

“*Really*, Grace.” Juri scoffed, pink cheeks deepening in color.

“Did the two of you even bother with eating any dinner?”

“The housekeeper, Nalea, she brought us some food.” Nevalo got to his feet, a smile plastered to his face.

“Ah, I’m glad to hear. She’s very smart about these kinds of things.” Grace nodded. “Do you think you’ll forgive Silero? He was feeling rather terrible when he left.”

“He left?” Juri frowned.

“Yes, he said he’d stay at the house in the city so that there was a room here in case Nevalo intended to stay.” Grace’s smirk grew to a slightly maniacal grin as Juri turned from pink to red.

“Yes, I thought as much. Not to worry, no one *here* is judging you, all things considered.”

“So...” Nevalo paused as if thinking how to word what he wanted to say. “You and Tharn...?”

“Yes, please don’t ask me to elaborate.”

“I would definitely prefer if you didn’t.” He nodded. “I just figured there had to be some reason since obviously, he wouldn’t have thought to arrange this on his own.”

“No, likely not.” She smiled, giving a little shrug. “So, now that it’s been sorted out, what do you think you will do?”

“Return to Ebonheart, I expect. Make up for lost time.” Nevalo’s grin widened.

“Ugh, alright, well that’s enough of this sappy nonsense for me for one night, I’m going back to bed! And when you retire, at least do us the courtesy of...being quiet.”

“As if *you’d* acquiesce to such a request, Gratiaren.” Juri teased, and Grace gave her mother a somewhat diabolical smile.

“Well, did *you* hear anything here tonight?”

“N-no...” Juri looked a little disturbed.

“Well, there you have it, mother. Goodnight!”

It was a little sad when Aggy and Talaray departed four days later. Grace enjoyed their company despite the animosity that had sprouted, grown, and blossomed between Abnur and her former-lover-turned-friend. She’d made good use of the time, however, allowing the full transcription of one of her Dwemer books to be made so that Aggy could continue to help her from afar. Hereic was, of course, delighted to work as closely as possible with the scholar he admired so much.

Not anyone had hardly seen hide nor hair of Juri and Nevalo since his shocking and unexpected arrival. Grace wasn’t going to speculate about their absence, though, as the idea of doing so made her, of all people, quite uncomfortable. What person, after all, is entirely comfortable with the intimate realities of their parents’ lives? Instead, she reveled in the peace and quiet, choosing to simply acknowledge that her largely miserable mother was finally experiencing some joy.

Even the investigation and the fact that Emedia Audtidenius had returned to the White-Gold tower were temporarily pushed out of mind for those precious, wonderfully uneventful days. Despite Grace’s wish to eliminate that particular threat of harm, she also wanted very much for it to be done with, and it was tempting to simply let Decir do all the work. She was torn, considering the evidence Clivia had given her. The mess needed to be finished, but even Grace was a victim of her own pride and cringed at the possibility of giving Abnur’s vile daughter any satisfaction at all.

“I have a favor to ask.” Avise leaned her hands on Grace’s desk.

Grace set down her pen. “Does it involve maiming anyone?”

“What? N-no...” Avise blinked, taken aback.

“Continue.”

“There is a book I am interested in reading. I heard about it at the guild. It elaborates on the use of theoretical arcanology in the healing arts.”

“You’re in luck,” Grace smirked. “I happen to right now be sitting in the *Imperial Archives*.”

“Yes, well, there’s only one copy of this book...in existence. Allegedly.” Avise wore an imploring smile, aiming for coy but not quite hitting the mark.

“Ah, shit. It’s one of Abnur’s books, isn’t it?” Grace sighed.

“I just want to look at it...I don’t have to take it anywhere. I figured if you asked him, he most likely wouldn’t say no since he’s...and you’re...”

“Well,” Grace looked at the clock. “He’ll be plenty busy at least for the next couple of hours. We can go look and see if he’s got it here. If not, it’s probably in his private collection at his estate in Nibenay, in which case, it might be a while before it gets here.” She pushed the chair back.

“Really? Now? He won’t be upset?”

“What’s he going to do, Avise? I’ve been sneaking into his libraries and reading his books without permission for more than fifteen years. How do you think I ended up in this situation in the first place?” Grace chuckled, getting to her feet. She needed a break anyway, she’d been sitting for hours.

“It took more than *fifteen* years to get to his bed?” Avise made a disbelieving noise.

“Well, as I’m sure you know, some people just require more foreplay than others, Avise.”

“Ew...” Avise grimaced. “Thanks for *that* thought I can never *un*-think.”

“I saw your sister and her Dunmer lover yesterday,” Avise whispered conspiratorially as they drew up to the apartment entry. “What does your father think?” Though Grace trusted Avise, she had not confided in her with the truth of her parents.

“He thinks he’s lucky Juri didn’t cut his throat in his sleep for keeping them apart for more than three decades.” Grace turned to Quint and Leo. “You can just stay out here.” They nodded, taking up their posts on either side of the door, and she went inside, Avise following closely.

“It’s hard to wrap my head around how it’s so commonplace to not be allowed to be with the person you love.” Avise let out a long breath. “But then, I grew up with very little, and with parents who married for love.”

“It’s an unfortunate side effect of being born to such a family and part of why I vowed to never marry.” Grace went on, heading toward Abnur’s open study.

“Well, it seems you’re smarter and a lot more headstrong than...” Avise’s comment was cut short by a sudden scream coming from Juri’s guest room.

Turning on her heel, Grace ran, a fiery mage-blade already in her hand. She turned the corner, and the door was open. There was a wrenching in her stomach; whatever was inside was not good.

Hester was down on her knees beside Juri, who lay unconscious. She had to be unconscious because Grace refused to believe she was anything else. Her eyes fell to the blood on Hester’s dress and shaking hands, the expanding pool on the floor.

“Mother!” She hurled herself to the floor, the blade dissipating in a puff of smoke. Juri’s eyes were closed, but the wound at the base of her neck was gushing. Avise moved fast, shoving the paralyzed maid out of the way, putting her hands around Juri’s throat at once, with a bright gold

flash.

“She’s not dead yet...please, please, please...” she whispered. A spiraling vortex of rage and pain grew inside Grace’s chest as she stared. Avise winced, pulling as much power as she could from within, but it didn’t seem to be enough. Doing the only thing she could, Grace put her hands over top of the healer’s, pouring forth her own power, perhaps recklessly, but she didn’t care.

“Take it, use it.” She whispered; the magic was no loss to her as in that moment, she felt overwhelmed by a furious surge of it. “Just...save her.”

The glow beneath Avise’s hands flashed brighter and intensified. Grace’s mind was whirling as fear and anger roiled within like the treacherous sea. Juri deserved more than four days of happiness!

“What happened?” Abnur demanded as he entered suddenly.

“Juri...no!” Nevalo had followed him and dropped down beside Grace.

Avise let out a long breath and released Juri. Her chest was rising and falling shallowly, and she didn’t wake.

“I...I did everything I could. The damaged mended, the wound closed, but...” Tears welled up in her eyes. “I did everything I could...”

“She’s lost a lot of blood.” Abnur murmured.

“*What* happened?” Grace demanded, peering at Hester, whose mouth worked soundlessly.

“I...found her. She’d asked for tea and when I came back...I didn’t think it had been long...” The maid told them quickly, looking from face to face. “Certainly not long enough for someone to...”

“Someone simply entered the premises and jammed something sharp into my mother’s neck? For *what* purpose?!” Grace was shaking, her mother’s blood staining her hands.

“Your mother?” Avise blinked, confusion on her face as well as tears.

“Juri is Grace’s mother, and I am her father,” Nevalo replied, his voice strained as he looked down at the mess. “We have to get her to the bed, get her cleaned up...get more healers...”

“She’s never done anything to anyone ever...this was done to hurt *me*...” Icy dread coursed through Grace’s veins. She should have focused on finding out who was responsible for the attempted rape. She might have found them by now, her mother might not by lying here in a pool of her own blood had Grace stayed *on task*.

“Isn’t...isn’t that woman is back?” Hester’s chest was heaving. “The one who you said...” She stopped the instant Grace pierced her with a withering glare.

“Emedia.” She whispered.

“Grace, don’t...” Abnur started.

“Hester.” She snapped, ignoring him. “Do something useful, summon Bradian Dexitullian. Be sure to communicate the urgency of this.”

“Y-yes, milady.” The frantic maid got up and hurried from the room.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t...” Avise shook her head, fear in her eyes.

“You’ve kept her alive; you did the most important part.” Grace turned to her father. “Let’s get her to the bed.”

Juri’s unconscious body was limp and heavy despite her being a rather small woman. It would have been only a simple gesture to make the blood vanish where it had pooled and where it stained her mother’s dress and now blankets. But Grace stared at it, the bright red like fuel to her fire until every fiber of her being felt charged and on the edge of combustion. She’d always thought of herself as a calculating, controlled person. Calculating, yes, but at this moment, there was no desire for control.

“Please keep watch over her, Avise, even while Bradian is here, I trust you. You’re not to leave her side.”

“Yes, of course. But...what are you...?”

“Yes, what *are* you doing?” Abnur asked, stepping forward. When Grace looked up at him, he frowned suddenly, almost recoiling.

“Finishing this.”

Revelation

5th of Sun's Dusk

Her eyes were *red*. Not tears of grief red, *Dunner* red. Tharn had only ever witnessed Grace's eyes do that in the midst of intense spellcasting or combat, and even then, it was a brief flash. This was persistent, burning red. It had been unexpectedly startling, and he blinked, glancing around the room where the healer-girl and Nevalo were tending to Grace's half-dead mother.

The entry door slammed, pulling him from the rare moment of disoriented thoughts. *Oh, no...* He knew exactly where she was going and why. Without another word, he bolted from the room, making for the entry. Outside, Grace's guards looked dazed, and Tharn didn't stop to check on them. She couldn't portal her way out of a potato sack, but she was very skilled at displacement. Already, she had vanished, and with a frustrated noise, Tharn opened a portal to the archives.

As he stepped into the still-quiet stacks, the portal closed behind him with a small pop and a spark, his arrival garnering only a couple casual glances. It wouldn't be the first time he'd arrived that way. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing up, though, as he sensed the subtle disturbances that a lesser mage would not. Whatever she was doing, it was barreling toward the archives the way violent waves obliterated small islands.

Quickly, Tharn marched up and down the central aisle, looking down each row in search of that blithering idiot, Emedia Audtidenius. She was part of the archival staff, so she had to be there somewhere, fulfilling her role, which was much less important than she liked to make it out to be. She was a glorified library assistant.

The haste with which he moved was drawing more attention now, and when Tharn emerged into the center of the common area, he spotted the dark-haired menace. He strongly suspected she had no part in anything that had happened to Grace, but he wasn't certain yet.

He took a step forward, but the archive entry doors slammed open with a shockwave that threw books from the shelves and toppled every object not bolted to the floor. Reflexively, he shielded himself, and the effects of the burst didn't touch him. The books, chairs, statues, tables, papers, and plentiful debris hung, suspended in the air as Grace entered through the doors, skin rippling with fire. The other people present in the archives were frozen in place, as though time itself had stopped. Emedia, however, was unaffected, looking wildly around as what most certainly might be her demise headed in her direction.

"Grace, stop..." Tharn dropped his shield, reaching inward, mind racing to find something that mattered to her that could, at the very least, give her pause. "This is the *archives*...are you going to destroy all of *this* because of *her*?" With a glance from her furious red eyes, he was wrapped in a silencing sphere, which he shattered effortlessly and at once, of course. A simple *shut up* would have sufficed.

"What are you *doing*?" Emedia was backed against a cabinet. Tharn turned to hopefully reach her first, but Grace displaced. In the blink of an eye, she had Emedia by the throat, a small scream escaping the woman before she squeezed a little.

"When did you begin thinking so highly of your own ambitions that the lives of innocents ceased to matter?" Her voice was quiet but clear, calm in a very dangerous way.

“W-what?” It was genuine bewilderment on the dark-haired woman’s face, but Tharn knew that in her blind rage, Grace wouldn’t see that. The terror and confusion in Emedia’s wide, blue eyes was proof enough even to him that she was not the culprit. However, it would have been utter madness to suggest such a thing at this moment. Grace wasn’t stronger than he was, obviously, but fueled by her often-repressed emotions, it would take very little for her to do incredible damage to their surroundings.

Tharn needed to be careful, *very* careful, not because he thought he couldn’t defend against her admittedly powerful magic, but because to use his against her could cost him more than a ruined archive. He put his hands out, and above them, a large, glowing, golden temporal seal burned itself into existence, floating midair. The center dial turned, locking everything that was suspended in its place. Even if she released her spell, nothing would fall.

“You want to do this in *public*?” He hissed, drawing closer.

“I want her to suffer.”

“I haven’t *done* anything!” Emedia shrieked.

“I’d shut up if I were you, if you have any hope of continuing your miserable existence.” Tharn let out a long breath. “Grace, listen to me. We will get to the bottom of it, I will undo...this...and have her taken away. You know where. We must do this *our* way, just as we did before.” Her red eyes turned to him, still angry, but brimming with tears. “I will tear her guts out myself if I have to, but we can’t do this *here*.” He was practically begging, and Abnur Tharn did *not* beg.

“It has to stop. If anyone else gets hurt...”

“Your mother isn’t dead, not yet at least. She’s got the best care in the Empire, her chances are good; you must come back to your senses...” He winced slightly as she bared her teeth at him, fingers tightening slightly around Emedia’s throat. Perhaps not the best choice of words. “Not. Here.”

Grace turned back to the petrified woman in her grip, Emedia was clutching her wrist with both hands, struggling to draw breath.

“I didn’t hurt anyone...I’ve never...I *would* never...I have *children*!” She thrashed in futility.

“I want her clapped in irons. That filthy dungeon will have to do.” Grace leaned close to Emedia’s face, red eyes brighter than ever. “We’ll see if your children see their mother again.”

Tharn gestured to the door where a shocked Decir stood with three of Tharn’s personal guards. Those he *knew* he could trust because he paid them himself.

“Decir and the guards are here, let her go.” His voice softened, and he reached out, putting his hand on Grace’s arms. “They’re taking her away. We will interrogate her later.” The red glow ceased, her eyes fading back to green. Finally, her grip loosened, and her arm dropped. Two guards seized Emedia by her arms, and she started struggling at once.

“Where are you taking me? I’ve done nothing wrong! You can’t do—” Her yapping ceased as Tharn snapped his fingers, binding her vocal cords for the time being. Decir looked warily around them, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, brows arched high with wisely unspoken opinions.

“Will there be anything else, my lord?”

“No. See to it that our captive makes it to her destination.” Tharn gave him a nod, and the valet

departed.

Grace wilted.

“My mother...” She whispered.

“She still lives, and the crime will not go unpunished.” He put a hand on her shoulder and tempted though he was to offer her the comfort no one else had ever gotten from him, this wasn’t the place. She glanced around, her eyes stopping on the glowing seal above, and she sighed, reaching up and slowly turned the inner dial backward. Every upset object slid neatly back into its place. After a second or two, everyone inside the archives and those who’d been caught in the wave outside of it, all resumed as though nothing happened. None of them would remember a thing.

“I should have had this entire mess dealt with by now.” She clenched and unclenched her jaw, anger still not far from the surface.

“Postulating about what cannot be undone will solve nothing.”

“I could have used a temporal seal like that when my mother was attacked.” Grace observed the archives around her, everyone carrying on in their blissful ignorance.

“It would have only worked if I was present for the attack, it’s not exactly a spell one should use lightly. Traces of it will remain here for a good while; if anyone with half a brain and a handful of real talent comes through, they’ll know something happened.” Tharn shook his head. “Come on, you need to get sorted before we proceed.” She looked at him, aghast. “Not what I meant, but that *is* one way to do it.”

Grace still had no idea where this dungeon was *actually* located, but she didn’t care enough to ask. It was useful, and that’s all that mattered for now. This time, however, she’d make an effort not to reveal her ties to Infernace. Her fire would burn as hot as an atronach’s, which was hotter, she wagered, than even Abnur’s, as long as she offered them a boon periodically. The two men she gave them last time she was here would likely hold her over for a couple years at minimum. In truth, she was surprised Abnur had not asked her about it.

“No daedra, this time.” She murmured, and he cocked a brow at her.

“I had been wondering...”

“Someday, I’ll tell you about it. That day...is not today.” A smile almost crossed her lips, but there was grim business afoot, which required her full attention.

Grace made her way to the cell where Emedia was being held. It wasn’t the same as the one the guards had been chained in; in fact, Emedia wasn’t chained at all. She was pacing back and forth in a very dry cell, likely the most luxurious of all of them. It even had a courtesy bucket to shit in.

“What in Oblivion is going on?” Their captive snapped, shaking. It was fear, not rage. With her own ire having cooled significantly, Grace’s logic flowed freely again. Abnur had not said the words, but she knew he didn’t think Emedia was responsible. This clean, dry cell he’d put her in made that evident. Logically, it didn’t fit for her to be guilty, and though it would have pleased her to let out some aggression, this woman didn’t deserve it. Grace wasn’t a monster, after all.

“A great many things, I think, that none of us has been privy to,” Grace told her, unlocking the door and stepping in. Emedia backed away from her, pressing against the stone wall. “It was never my intent to become someone that people fear.”

“You should have thought about that before throwing your lot in with Abnur Tharn.” Emedia huffed.

“That’s a very fair point.” Grace nodded. “Four people have been brought down here now, on my account. The first was the duke, who tried to rape me. You will have heard, of course, of the grisly death of Duke Aquilarios. The next two were his guards, who kept watch while he tried. After a little torture, I handed them over to some daedra, so I assume their demise followed not long after. And now...I am here...with you.”

“Admitting to all that, you mean to kill me, too.” Emedia’s beautiful face twisted as she contended with the idea of her own death.

“Despite the fact that you’re a duplicitous bitch and that it gives me great pleasure to frighten you, considering I’ve never actually done anything to earn your wrath...I will assure you that I will neither torture nor kill you.”

“Then what the fuck am I in here for?”

“There’s a target on your back, Emedia, as well as mine, it seems.” Grace gestured in front of them, conjuring two wooden stools and sat on one of them. After a moment of hesitation, her captive sat on the other.

“Who?”

“Clivia Tharn wants you eradicated. She thinks you seek to replace her.”

“Of course I do.” Emedia scoffed.

“I thought as much, and frankly I couldn’t care less about any of that, I loathe that woman. But she made a point of showing me letters that implied you sought to get rid of me. So, this time, your ambition has reached too high.” Grace explained, watching her. Abnur was out of view, but no doubt listening. He was far too nosy to allow this to be a private conversation.

“So then Clivia is trying to get rid of you, also?” Emedia frowned. “To what end? I can’t see she’d benefit overmuch from offing her father’s lover.”

“Precisely, so I’m not convinced that her manipulation to get me to kill you is connected to my attack, and now the attack of my mother as well. The longer it goes on, the more desperate and nonsensical it seems to be.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“We’ll never be friends, Emedia, but we’re both women with secrets. Your secret is that your mother was a prostitute. My secret is that my father is Nevalo Terrvos, and my mother is Juri Tiradia.” Grace’s goal was no longer to annihilate this woman, as she’d sought to do in her uncontrolled rage, earlier, but now they needed to work together.

“So, I’m a purer Imperial than you.” Emedia chuckled.

“I guess that depends on who fucked your whore mother and got her with child.” Grace shrugged, and Emedia’s mirth diminished. “But...it’s neither here nor there. You need to find a way to stay

alive while Clivia wants you dead, and I need to find out who is responsible for the violence against my family and me.”

“Are you *so* important that someone would *want* you dead?”

“Not at all. I think ultimately, Abnur is the intended victim. But this person must be an amateur if they’ve been trying to drive a wedge between us.” Grace got to her feet, pacing a little. Unexpectedly, it seemed to help to discuss things aloud with this loathsome enemy.

“Well, what are the circumstances around the attack on your mother?” Emedia crossed her arms, stroking her chin. Abnur stepped into view and entered the cell.

“I heard Juri and Nevalo arrive back from wherever they were, so I stepped out of my study, and asked if I could speak with him. He came to the study, and she went to her room to change. It seemed only five or so minutes had passed before the maid screamed.” He folded his hands behind his back, looking from Grace to Emedia, clearly uneasy about their apparent alliance.

“It seems whoever did the attacking was lying in wait, so little time passing between your mother going to her room and the scream.” Emedia’s brow furrowed. “How then did they escape? You saw no one, I presume.”

“No, there was no one.” Grace shook her head, then icy dread settled into her stomach. “Whoever it was might have been hiding in the room, still after she was found.”

“Who found her?” Emedia stood up then, fists on her hips. Grace supposed that she wasn’t a stupid woman, she’d come far from such low birth. That wasn’t something an individual with an inferior intellect could accomplish.

“My handmaid, she’s the one who screamed. I’d just gotten to the apartment, we rushed in, and she was kneeling there, shaking. She could hardly talk...”

“Did she say anything?”

“That my mother wanted tea, Hester had gone to get it, and when she came back, Juri was bleeding on the floor.” Grace frowned. “Why? You think she might know who did it?”

“Was there a tea tray? Overturned pot? Broken cup?” Emedia’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t recall...”

“No, there wasn’t,” Abnur spoke up, his eyes widening.

“What are you suggesting?” The dread in Grace’s stomach reached up like a frozen fist, closing over her heart.

“Honestly.” Emedia rolled her eyes. “I thought you were *smart*, Gratiaren.”

“You can’t seriously be suggesting that Hester would...” Grace halted, combing through every memory, every interaction. “But she’s just...for what *possible* reason would she...?”

“Well, if whoever is seeking to undo the chancellor hired her...” Emedia gave a small shrug. “It sounds like your little maid ought to be here, not me.”

Betrayal drove through Grace like a spear.

“She must have been looking for something when Juri came in, or she was planting something...”

something that implicated her enough that the only solution in her mind was murder.” Abnur let out a long breath.

“There. I’ve helped. Your secret is safe with me, my secret is safe with you, and so on and so forth. Let me go.” Emedia’s bitchy veneer was back in place, but Abnur shook his head.

“No. Not yet. If my daughter wants you dead, you’re safer here for now. Let her think you’ve vanished. There are bigger problems at present.” He was watching Grace, though, undoubtedly waiting to see if she went off the deep end again.

“But my children...”

“I’ll send one of my guards to keep an eye on them.”

“You’re just going to hold me captive?!” Emedia shrieked.

“What’s better, spending a little time in a cell or being dead?” Abnur growled. She didn’t reply, instead glaring. “Don’t look so upset, I put you in the nice cell.”

“The *nice* ce—?”

“We need to go *now*,” Grace interjected. “If they leave my mother alone with her, she might try to finish the job.”

A Head Start

5th of Sun's Dusk

"Where is Hester?" Grace stormed into her mother's room. Her father, Avise, and the doctor all looked up a bit taken aback by the sharp demand. Avise frowned, though.

"She brought Dr. Dexitullian, but then left, why?"

"Because *she* did this." The mixture of fury, grief, and betrayal shook through Grace, a constant tremble that felt like a dam close to bursting. Nevalo, immediately outraged, stepped forward, but she put a hand up. "This is not your problem to solve. Stay here with her, she'll be a good deal happier to see you than either of them if she wakes up."

"You mean *when* she wakes up." His jaw clenched and unclenched. She wanted to say *when*, she wanted to believe everything would be fine.

Stepping into the corridor again, Grace saw Decir. Abnur had summoned him, no doubt, and she followed him to the study. Abnur stood behind his desk, flipping quickly through the pages of a book.

"What can I do for you, my lord?" Decir folded his hands behind his back, but Abnur gestured vaguely at Grace as he started scanning the text in front of him. The valet turned to her, looking mildly confused.

"Hester, my maid, was responsible for what happened to my mother, not Emedia. There is no conceivable connection between me and Hester, so I still have to assume her overall target is Abnur. She's fled, obviously. Though, it's curious that she did fetch the doctor first." Grace folded her arms, tapping her lips with her fingers.

"Your mother was likely unintentional collateral damage. Hester got the doctor because it was a mistake, and perhaps fled after since her involvement would become apparent?" Decir offered.

"Maybe. Even if that's the case, it makes up for nothing if she's the one who incited the duke to do what he did. *And* she's the one who put a knife in my mother's neck. Intent counts for nothing, actions are everything." It was growing steadily more difficult to remain objective. "First, she must be found, and the connection must be made. We cannot be certain whether or not she is alone in these acts or if she was bid to do it by someone else."

"Everyone who comes to work for this household is thoroughly investigated before taking up their position. I don't remember anything standing out with her. She came from a merchant family, originally from Colovia, but they operate out of Anvil." He paused though, his brow drawing together in a frown.

"We need to search her room." Grace turned on her heel, marching out toward the kitchen where the corridor to the servants' quarters was. "Nalea!" The housekeeper emerged at once, drying her hands on her apron.

"Yes, milady?"

"I need to see Hester's room right now."

"I...I beg your pardon, milady, but our rooms are private, it is in the agreement..."

"Ordinarily, yes. But she stabbed my mother. Her contracted rights to privacy in this household are revoked, I'd say." Grace tried not to be short with her, it wasn't her fault, of course. The horror etched on the woman's face, however, made it plain enough what a shock it was as she shakily retrieved the keys from her pocket.

"Yes, of course. This way..." Nalea bustled down the hallway and stopped in front of a door, which was open already. "It's...the room is a mess..."

Grace stepped in and saw that garments had been torn from drawers and thrown, various containers emptied onto the floor. Hester had left in a hurry. Decir stepped in beside her, his astute eyes flicking over everything.

"May I?" He asked.

"Yes, do what you do." She murmured, watching, arms folded.

"My lady, I did not know that she...I would have never guessed..." Nalea looked ready to go to pieces.

"I know." Grace sighed. "It isn't your fault; we were all fooled."

Decir opened drawers, felt for hidden compartments, looked behind hung paintings, then got down on the floor, his ear pressed against the boards. He knocked lightly, listening for a hollow spot.

"I can't remember exactly where it is..." He kept tapping.

"Where what is?" Grace watched curiously.

"These rooms all have clever little hiding spots, I made sure of it some years ago when they were redone." He explained, getting a hollow knock. He sat up and wiggled a small segment of plank that eventually popped up. Inside, *in* the floor, there was what appeared to be a lot of paperwork."

"Well, *that's* convenient, isn't it? Too convenient, I think. Seems rather stupid to keep important things so close..." Grace shook her head.

"Most of these are private letters, it looks like. She probably took anything truly damning with her. Smart, really, putting the unimportant things in the obvious not-obvious place." He paused, though, reading. "This is from her father, it's dated several years ago...it mentions the, ah...shipping business that the chancellor has used...in the past..." She knew he was being vague in the presence of Nalea. Abnur's off-the-official-record business was, in part, utilized for some smuggling, nothing that would endanger the Empire, of course, but also for maintaining clear trade routes from the Imperial city out to the Abecean Sea. "We need to talk with the chancellor."

"Nalea, close and lock this room, don't clean it up yet, there's likely more digging to be done." Grace patted the housekeeper's shoulder and started down the corridor again, Decir on her heels.

"Obviously the connection didn't occur to me before, but there have been a good number of strange problems down at the docks here, and at the location which we maintain in Anvil with things like ledgers going missing or being sabotaged." He kept his voice low. "Oddly, no goods were *actually* stolen."

"What would she have to do with any of that?"

“I don’t know.”

They entered the study again, and Abnur looked up, expectantly from where he was now sitting at his desk.

“Well?”

“The maid is definitely gone. Two of my associates went out along with the guards you sent after her. The room was torn apart already, and I found letters, but there may be other things. I’ll have someone come take a closer look. For now, it’s my belief that there is a connection between the maid and the shipping business. Her father mentioned it being troublesome for them in a letter that was stowed away.” Decir reported. “I need to investigate further, now that there is a little more information. I can see if the connections are what I think they are.”

“I suspect she’s more adept with magic than any of us noticed. Particularly with masking it, considering neither Grace nor myself noticed. If that’s the case, she won’t remain local for very long.” Abnur came out from behind his desk and snatched the letters from Decir, shuffling them a bit, but not really reading them. Grace knew what he was doing. The letters weren’t damning evidence, but they were important enough to Hester that she’d kept them all these years. Enough of her was imprinted on them for him to scry for her.

Abnur closed his eyes, a purplish glow emanating from around his hands and the papers. His brow furrowed a little, and it seemed to take much longer than other times Grace had witnessed him do this. Her own ability to scry was about as useful as her ability to create portals.

“I was right, she’s got *some* knowledge of magic and has left the city already. She seems to be headed back for Anvil. Her portals are erratic, all over the place, and unstable. It’s unclear if that’s on purpose or if she’s just not very good at them. My guess would be the latter.” The glow stopped, and he gave the letters back to Decir. “Call your men off the search but look into her activities in the palace and in the city.”

“Yes, my lord.” Decir gave a deep nod then left the study. Grace looked from the door and back to Abnur.

“If we know where she’s headed, shouldn’t we *go* there?” She shook her head, incredulous. “You know, before she’s got time to prepare or...whatever else will make things more difficult for us.”

“She’s already marked for death and knows it, or she wouldn’t have fled. I want to find out the connection she has with my *merchants* before moving ahead. It could be that her father’s business was an obstacle in some way. I recall there were several that were.”

“And what was done about these *obstacles*?” She folded her arms, eyes narrowing at him. There were a few guesses.

“The first choice was to buy them out and send them on their merry way with a substantial pile of gold. The next option was to destroy their vessels and cargo and *then* leave them with a substantial pile of gold. You see? I’m not the monster you think I am. These are Imperial citizens, we get them out of the way without murdering them. Generally.”

“Generally.” Grace scoffed. “What if Options A and B both fail? What then?”

“To my knowledge, that’s never happened. I can’t think many merchants wouldn’t be swayed by gold.” Abnur shrugged.

“Of course not, you’ve been wealthy your entire life.”

“So have you.”

“Yes, but I don’t place myself *above* those who are less fortunate than I am.” She sighed.

“You do, all of us do. Some people just have a harder time admitting it. Whether you believe it or not, I still strive to do what’s best for the Empire.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Rolling her eyes, Grace stepped around the sofa and sat down, elbows on her knees as she rubbed her face in frustration. “I can’t be expected to just sit here while that traitorous bitch is still out and about.”

“Patience never was one of your virtues.” Abnur came around the sofa and sat down beside her, letting out a long breath.

“Because I have so many of those.”

“Well,” He gave a snort of amusement. “Why not go sit at your mother’s bedside? I’m sure Nevalo could use the company of his daughter.” He shrugged as she turned to stare at him like he’d grown a second head.

“Who are you? Because I was speaking with Abnur Tharn a moment ago.”

“I don’t care if your mother dies. Better?”

“Much.” She almost smirked. “I’m certainly not going in there to sit and stare at an unconscious person, though.”

“No? Why not?” He sat back, arms crossed.

“Because he’s in there having *feelings* about things. Me sitting there staring at him in uncomfortable silence while he talks about them will help no one.”

“So, you’re in here having feelings about things and bothering me instead?”

“Feelings of betrayal and a hunger for vengeance, yes.” Grace sat back as well, her left side pressed firmly against Abnur from shoulder to knee. “I imagine he’s all maudlin and nostalgic. Probably regretting that he wasn’t a better father to me or a husband to my mother or some such nonsense.”

“Yes. You’re certainly *never* sentimental. I suppose you were bound to inherit *some* useless thing from your parents. Nobody’s perfect. Almost.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She glared at him. “I’m not like that, I’ve *never* been like that.”

“You are like that, and always have been.”

“You’ve *said* that you liked that I am logical and adhere to reason.”

“Which is true. Somehow, you manage to act and think *despite* such a hindrance.”

“Why are we even talking about this?” She got to her feet, looking down at him. “I need to get to Anvil, Abnur.”

“Don’t be stupid.” He rolled his eyes, sitting forward. “There isn’t sufficient information yet to merit the trip. What are you going to do? Walk around and ask if anyone’s seen your maid?”

“I will do whatever is necessary to bring an end to this insanity. She was privy to everything that

was happening, all the while being the person who offered support as well as service. She *helped* me the night I came back bloody and beaten! Crying her fake tears of sympathy. She's betrayed me in every conceivable way, so whether or not your ruin is her goal or someone else's, I'm *going* to find her."

"And then what?" Abnur stood, crossing his arms.

"What do you think?" Even as they spoke, Hester could have been getting farther and farther away. With her ability to portal, she had the advantage over Grace.

"So you're going to hunt down this person who was your friend and confidant, interrogate her, and then kill her? Freely, with no hesitation?"

"She put a blade in my mother's neck, Abnur. Even if I had never been attacked, that would suffice to negate any semblance of positive feelings that might have existed toward her." She shook her head, angry and frustrated. "You mustn't forget that I am not just a silly girl who reads books and builds clockwork contraptions. Now, more than ever, I regret not accepting a place with the battlemages. I think I've proven myself a capable opponent in every way to whoever might seek to do me harm."

"Yet it isn't you the maid sought to harm."

"I don't fucking care what she sought to do, or meant to do!"

"Now you're being irrational." He made an irritated and inconvenienced sound. "So much for that *emotional control* I mistakenly believed you capable of. I'm not going to Anvil. The way it works is that these individuals are found by the people in my employ, brought to me, and then dealt with. It's worked that way since I *became* Chancellor."

"I don't recall asking for your permission, *or* for you to accompany me. All you'd do is draw unwanted attention, anyway. At least nobody knows *my* face."

"Really? You think *I* would be a hindrance?" He gave a mirthless laugh. "The biggest danger to the operation right now is *you*, with your thirst to spill her blood. You're going to do something stupid and rash and compromise everything. If you're caught for murder or anything else, for that matter, there isn't anything I can do for you."

"You mean there isn't anything you *will* do." Grace felt foolish for having expected support from him. She'd let herself become distracted by fanciful notions of what their involvement was. The moment that things got riskier, he was stepping away. It was a painful reminder of the unpleasant truth.

"It's going to take you days to get there. Days you could spend doing something intelligent, like preparing. By the time you arrive, we'll have gotten the information we need." He looked smug, as though having come to the point that would convince her not to go.

"You're not the only person in this city proficient with portals." Watching him with a mixture of fury and disappointment, she shook her head, almost sadly. "With or without your help, I'm going." Abnur remained stubbornly silent. "Fine," She whispered. "I don't *need* you, anyway."

Grace left the study with a cold, hard stare boring into her back. Everything was exponentially worse now, of course. It would have been much easier if he'd even at least agreed she should go, even if he wasn't coming.

Teeth clenched, keeping the tangle of emotions at bay, she dressed in her leathers. What did this

mean for them? If she did find Hester and managed to bring her back...or do whatever else might be necessary, would she forgive him for this abandonment? Could she? With a sharp exhale, she pulled out the leather pack from the bottom of her designated armoire in Abnur's vast closet. It already had everything she needed in it for just such an endeavor.

"So. You've always got a bag at the ready, in case you need to flee." Came Abnur's icy voice. She hadn't heard him enter and cast him a dirty look.

"If my preparedness wounds you, Abnur, then your pride is far more delicate than I ever thought. I am ready to leave at a moment's notice for a great many more reasons than escaping you." She pulled the pack on. Would he mock and berate her the entire way out of the palace? Or perhaps he'd just insult her intelligence some more for daring to disagree with his preferred methods of dealing with those who would see him fall.

A very long silence stretched on as Grace adjusted her leathers and the straps of the pack to be more comfortable. There was plenty of money inside if she needed it, as well as provisions, and various potions, poisons, and compounds. There were knives and tools that would prove useful, whether she was at a dig or an interrogation.

"You..." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, not able to look him in the eye just yet. "You were so bothered by the thought that I always believed the worst of you regardless of what you've done for me. How am I supposed to feel now, when I had been thinking the best of you, and the fears I had so painstakingly worked to finally let go of...are proven true?"

Abnur's expression was stony, completely unreadable, but he watched her, unblinking, unmoving. Angered further by his lack of response, Grace moved to push past him, but he grabbed her arm, his grip like a vice. She stared up, almost baring her teeth at the aggressive gesture. He knew better than to even dare to try and stop her this way.

"What the fuck do you think you're do...?" She stopped as he opened a portal behind her, and a frown knit her brow.

"*Don't* kill her before I get there." His grip loosened just a little.

"Abnur, what..." She couldn't finish as he gave her a shove through the portal.

Anvil

5th of Sun's Dusk

Grace landed hard on what felt and sounded like wooden planks, all the air leaving her lungs as she saw the edges of the portal flicker and then close. Well, that was unexpected. She could hear the sound of small waves lapping against the shore, or the docks...wherever this was. Trying to get her bearings, she clamored to her feet, and one boot slipped off the edge. She gave a small yelp, pitching headlong toward the dark water, but hands from nowhere caught her.

"Easy there." It was a male voice, obviously belonging to the hands. "Alright?" He hoisted her up, setting her firmly on her feet, and Grace peered up at a towering individual. His features were obscured by darkness, but he was dressed in the garb of a guard. Perfect, just what she needed, a law-enforcer as she embarked on a hunt to find and kill someone. A strange woman popping out of a portal would be memorable.

"Er...thanks." She brushed herself off.

"I thought portal travel was supposed to be easy travel." He chuckled.

"It *is* when someone doesn't push you through it." She let out an impatient breath, unsure what to make of what had just happened. Abnur had helped her, hadn't he? But also, he hadn't. She didn't have any of the documents or information she'd intended to bring with her. She had Hester's family's name and nothing else. It would have to be enough.

Her rescuer had turned, continuing his patrol when finally, her brain started working like it needed to be.

"Guard? Excuse me..." She called, halting him and he came back.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for a merchant business, run by the Galanis family." It was worth a shot, but the frown that suddenly crossed the guard's face wasn't reassuring.

"They haven't been around for years." He folded his arms, thinking for a moment. "Yeah, I think the whole family left after the storm, what was left of them, if I recall."

"What storm?" Grace tried not to look too eager for information. She was the ideal person for investigating ruins and history. For situations such as this, she lacked the subtlety that someone like Decir would have been extremely proficient with.

"It was a long time ago, miss. There was a storm, and they lost their ships while some of the family was on board. Why are you so concerned with the Galanis family?" He was growing suspicious. *Damn it!* Time to lie. Doable, at least, with a complete stranger.

"They were old family friends...I had long promised to visit and was never able before now." It was dark enough that the obviousness that she was being untruthful wouldn't be so apparent.

"I see, well...sorry for your loss. It's getting late, though, so you should probably find an inn for the night. The docks aren't safe after dark, especially for a woman." He gave a nod, then left her

standing there on the dock.

“*Especially for a woman.*” She muttered when he was out of earshot, rolling her eyes.

There was little that could be accomplished tonight. Gathering information required people to gather it from, and just about everyone who wasn’t drunk or up to no good had already turned in for the night. As Grace passed through the main Anvil gate from the docks, she was nearly bowled over by two men as they were thrown out of an inn. Obviously, they’d been ejected for fighting as the fight seemed not to have been interrupted by their forceful removal. She looked at them for a long moment as a few other spectators stepped out to take bets and such. This was as good a place as any to stop for the night. It had been a long, exhausting day, after all.

Grace tossed and turned all night as the accommodations she’d grown accustomed to, were of a far higher quality than this homespun nightmare of straw ticking with blankets the texture of burlap. When had she become such a snob? There was also the matter of how quickly she’d come to depend on a bedfellow for warmth. Anvil had a fairly warmish clime, but the nights were still quite cold, and without a body to wriggle up next to, it felt as if a chill had seeped into her very bones.

More annoying than anything else was the stab of disappointment at waking up alone, wishing he-whose-name-she-refused-to-acknowledge-because-she-was-still-furious was there. When had she become *this* person? The woman who felt the absence of...*him* after only a few hours. It was revolting. Very secretly, she hoped he was equally miserable.

Finally, she stretched and opened her eyes, giving a sudden start when her eyes lighted upon the person seated at the small table.

“Damn it, Decir!” She groaned. He lowered the book in front of his face that he’d been reading.

“Yes, milady?”

“Probably shouldn’t call me that whilst trying to avoid notice, don’t you think?” Frowning, she sat up, and the valet shrugged one shoulder. The wards she’d placed on the door and window hadn’t been touched.

“Who’s going to hear? The vermin?”

“You never know.” She stood up and plucked her journal from his hands and snapped it closed. “I’ll thank you to respect my privacy.”

“And it was just getting *good*, too.” Decir heaved a theatrical sigh. He seemed much less like there was a pole rammed up his backside when he was out of Abnur’s direct sphere of influence.

“That son of a bitch portaled you directly in here, didn’t he?” Grace glowered. It was no surprise that Abnur would be able to pinpoint her exact location. He was acutely aware of her and her arcane *flavor*, after all.

“He thought you could use a hand.”

“Oh, so *now* he’s being helpful?” She sat back on the edge of the bed, pulling her boots on, lips pressed into a grim line.

“He was terrorizing the whole household, so I don’t know what you said to him, but...it was effective.” He gave a snort of amusement, hands folded across his middle. “His bed wasn’t slept in,

so I imagine that's got something to do with his wonderful mood."

"Good. I'm glad he's angry." Grace realized then what a petulant child she sounded like. "How is my mother?"

"She still hasn't woken. Silero arrived late last night, fit to be tied, he was so angry. He got into quite the shouting match with Tharn, especially on realizing you'd left. It was deeply entertaining."

"I'm sorry I missed it." She almost laughed, pulling the straps tighter on her boots before reaching for her jacket. "So, all I've managed to find out since my abrupt arrival is that Hester's family's business has been gone for years. Though I don't know how many."

"I grabbed the dock master's logs, going back to about seven or eight years ago. The maid had only been in our employ for the last four years." Decir pulled hoisted up a satchel and handed it to Grace. "We'll need to comb through those to see when exactly the business dissolved."

"We?" She gave him a level look.

"One of my associates will. Mostly I'm here to move you from this filth-ridden shit hole to the significantly more sanitary place we use when operating here."

"Of *course*, he owns property here." She rolled her eyes. "Let's go, then."

Grace half expected Abnur to be there when she stepped into the house Decir led her to. It was not the sort of place anyone stayed for leisure, that much was certain. There were several people inside in the midst of various tasks. Sorting through documents, poring over maps, someone fixing tea. Decir handed over his satchel of records to one of them who didn't appear to be as busy as the others. The woman got to work at once, pulling the books out and starting to flip through.

"The maid arrived in Anvil yesterday and hasn't left. Or at least, she hasn't left via portal." Decir told Grace, leading her to the table where a map lay with several points marked on it.

"How do you know?" She peered down at the very erratic path.

"This map will place a marker if she opens a portal, milady." A young man in leather with his hood up gave a polite nod.

"No titles here, if you please." She muttered. "I prefer being no one."

"Yes, of course, er..." He balked at her name.

"Just call me Grace." She let out a long breath, staring at the portal marker closest to the city. "I'm guessing that all the Galanis business assets were liquidated, but I suspect there is probably a house somewhere here that is still owned by Hester."

"We've got people keeping an eye out for her," Decir assured her.

"All this, and Abnur seemed to think there was no progress that could be made right away." Grace huffed. "Whatever happened, my guess would be that Abnur's shipping business had something to do with the Galanis family." The most unsettling thing that she feared just then was that Hester might have a justifiable reason for her aggression against Abnur.

Tharn was not surprised that Grace had wanted to leave for Anvil at once, nor was it a shock that she'd reacted badly to his insistence that they wait until better prepared. What he hadn't anticipated, though he should have, was that she would go anyway. He knew what her temper was like; it wasn't a monumental logical leap to the reality that she'd be unreasonable in the face of violence against her family. He wasn't sure which was more irritating, though, her volatile and accusatory reaction to his perfectly sensible suggestions, or the fact that he'd given in. At least partially, anyway. Had it been anyone else, he'd have believed her words were meant to serve as manipulation. Fortunately for him, he knew manipulation simply wasn't in her wheelhouse where he was concerned.

She'd been gone two days but had Decir to look after her. Tharn didn't trust that Grace wouldn't choke the life out of the damnable maid with her bare hands should she find her before he arrived. Often it seemed she considered herself morally superior, mainly when it came to the darker aspects of Tharn's own career as the Chancellor of the Elder Council. However, blinded by rage and grief, her lines blurred significantly, and she was every bit as flexible within the gray areas as he was.

Tharn looked at the empty spot in his bed that she usually occupied and scowled at it, hating that her absence caused him any disquiet at all. How, by all the Daedra, Aedra, and anything in between, had he gotten himself to a point where this person, this *woman* that he...that he what? Carnally enjoyed? Yes, that was it. How had she somehow acquired in his mind enough importance that her departure affected him in the slightest?

This was the third night she'd been gone, and it didn't seem that Tharn was dozing off any easier than the night before. He didn't *miss* her, of course, he wasn't some soft-hearted sap, after all. But their nocturnal activities had become a regular fixture in his routine throughout the last couple of weeks. They made going to sleep all the easier, as well as more enjoyable.

That wasn't all, though, was it? *Damn it all to Oblivion.* Tharn harrumphed and turned over, his back to her spot, extinguishing the candle. Typically, afterward, she would lie at his side facing him, her head on his arm, her fingers lazily trailing through the hair on his chest. The feel of those little fingertips always made him sleepy as they'd murmur quietly about small things of note from throughout the day. There'd been no reason to consciously think about it before.

He'd become as pathetic as every besotted fool he'd ever mocked. At least after tomorrow, he wouldn't need to think about it anymore since he'd meet her in Anvil. Unless she was still angry with him, which seemed likely. Maybe it would calm her ire if he let her simply tear the maid apart. Grace had earned it, after all, since the vile little snake had nearly gotten her raped, destroyed her office, caused her copious angst and frustration, and then almost killed her mother.

Decir's *associates* barely glanced up when Tharn stepped from his portal into the central room, where they busily continued their investigation. He didn't sense that Grace or the valet were present, despite knowing that he was due to arrive. She would defy him at every turn until her anger was sated.

"Chancellor." Finally, he was acknowledged. The slim man approached, giving a respectful nod. "It has come to our attention that the Galanis family were staunchly opposed to accepting any payment to close down or sell their business. According to Mr. Crotav, your shipping foreman, Mr. Galanis, and his sons became outright hostile and violent toward him and his men."

"And?"

“And there is some doubt to the truth of that statement. It would seem that there was existing enmity between the two businesses, to begin with.”

“Perfect.” Tharn clenched his teeth, exhaling his annoyance. “I want Crotav brought in. Where is Decir?”

“Ah...he went to, um, as he put it...ensure the Lady doesn’t paint Anvil with the insides of the treacherous maid.”

“Good, that’s what I sent him here for in the first place. When did she leave...”

There was a commotion outside the front door, raised voices, a loud bang, then it slammed open. Grace stomped inside, face red, baring her teeth, and Decir followed, looking more harried than Tharn had ever seen him. But, if anyone was going to ruffle the un-ruffleable valet, it would be her. She possessed special skills when it came to running even the most even-keeled people ragged.

“She was *right* there. I could have had that fucking bitch!” The snarl tore from her as it would a vicious animal.

“I’m not sure if anyone’s ever told you, you bloody lunatic, but it’s generally frowned upon to just burn people to death in public!” Decir ran his hands back over his hair, shaking his head. The both of them noticed Tharn simultaneously. The valet looked relieved, but Grace’s raging bloodlust didn’t abate.

“Oh, so you’ve decided to join us?” She hissed. Fortunately, he’d had no delusions that she might have even a remotely welcoming countenance. He ignored her, though, looking at the nervous thin man who had been updating him.

“Does she know what you told me?” His stare was cold and hard.

“No, sir. They’d been gone some hours...”

“What is it, my lord?” Decir straightened his jacket with some force, clearly still angrier than his calm tone revealed.

“You need to bring Crotav in, I have questions for him. It seems there was an existing feud.” Tharn told the valet and glanced at his associate. “That was your conclusion, was it not?”

“Yes, sir.” The man nodded, appearing to begin to sweat.

“Dismissed.” Decir waved him away.

“That would be very convenient for you, wouldn’t it, if you were *not* to be at fault for whatever she’s seeking revenge for?” Grace folded her arms, still seething.

“Naturally. Though, that’s not to say the maid hasn’t earned her sentence.” It was difficult to discern whether Grace’s anger was solely at being denied her opportunity to finish what she’d started, or if she was still angry with Tharn as well. “Decir, find Crotav and ensure he is...detained, at the warehouse. Grace, I’d like a word with you.” He started for the staircase without seeing if she assented or not. She would come.

When he reached the landing, he heard the frustrated huff behind him as she followed, and he stepped into the upstairs bedchamber. Her things were strewn about, and the bed was unmade.

“I trust it’s more comfortable here than that deplorable inn?” He turned toward her as she glowered.

“What will they think, you demanding I follow you upstairs?” Arms folded, she leaned against the doorframe, safely out of reach.

“I couldn’t care less. We’re not here to discuss scandal. If the situation unfolds as I think it will, the shipping foreman will be found responsible for what happened to the Galanis family. Considering that my goal was to gain an unshakeable foothold in this port, I was very specific about what was to happen with the business owners. Crotav violated that, if it turns out he’s responsible for their demise.”

“He lied through his teeth to us, that much was certain when Decir and I spoke with him. I’d wager he’s done a good deal more to pull the wool over your eyes than lie about killing Hester’s family.” Grace scoffed, but then stepped into the room, shaking her head. “When does this end?”

“I have a proposal.” Tharn began, and she eyed him warily as if he was about to pull out a ring box. He bit back his initial response, however, before continuing. “We can kill two birds with one stone, here.”

“You mean two traitors with one blade?”

“Same difference. Let the maid know about the truth of what happened. I imagine it would be best coming from you. Offer her the retribution she craves.”

“Let her kill Crotav?” Grace frowned. “And then what? Turn around and kill her?”

“That’s up to you. But, catch her by luring her with the truth and then bring matters to their inevitable conclusion. Afterward, I promote someone to Crotav’s position, and the person terrorizing you for the last month disappears.” It would be a convenience if it worked out.

“Basically, you’re telling me to stop hunting her down like a dog?”

“Yes. Do you think you can control yourself long enough to get her to the warehouse?” He watched her fidgeting and pointedly not looking at the bed. If he thought she’d be amiable to the suggestion, he’d have contemplated making it, but valuing his bowels and his balls precisely where they presently were, he wouldn’t dare.

“Am I supposed to *lie* to her and tell her that I don’t want to kill her?” The lie apparently would be more bothersome than the taking of a human life, which Tharn found intriguing. He did sometimes forget that her skillset went well beyond that of a scholar. The most dangerous thing about her was that no one realized just what she was. Even he envied the possession of such a weapon. He wasn’t about to surprise anyone any time soon unless it was to commit some random act of kindness. Already *that* quota had been met by sending the silly assistant girl to the healing guild.

“No. You’re a terrible liar, she would know. Worst case scenario, you might be forced to subdue her and then bring her along.”

“Fine.” Her quick acquiescence was unexpected. “I’ll do what I have to.” Her face did very interesting things when she was thinking, and as she thought, the silence stretched on for some time. “Are you aware that your portal nearly dropped me into the harbor?”

“It had been my intention, but I changed my mind at the last second,” Tharn smirked at her glare, and Grace rolled her eyes.

“I still think that coming here when I did was the wise choice.”

“You’re entitled to think whatever you like.” He thought she was just lucky that things had worked

out the way it had.

“Well, that sounds like attempted provocation for an argument I don’t have the energy for.” She turned to where her bag sat on the side table and rummaged for a moment before pulling out a small leather tool roll. She tucked it into a satchel, slung it across her chest, then stepped up in front of him. “I’ve been wondering if things will be different without all this hanging over our heads. I figure, though, that you’re the same all the time, and will continue to be so...”

“But?” He arched one brow at her.

“But I’m setting out to end the life of someone who was my friend, so...I might be the one who is different when it’s over.”

“She was never your friend, Grace.” The possibility that she would be affected by all this had crossed Tharn’s mind on several occasions. He supposed that burning the maid alive from afar would undoubtedly be different than ending things in close quarters.

“That doesn’t change how I felt. When the time comes that I face what I have done, all I ask is that you let me go through it, Abnur. I’m not you, I’m not used to this yet.”

“Yet?”

“Yes, *yet*. Do you think I’m stupid enough to believe this is the last time someone is going to try to kill either of us.” A small smile crept across her lips. “I’ve accepted that whatever this is, it comes with certain hazards.”

“It *is* important to have realistic expectations.”

Reckoning

8th of Sun's Dusk

It was difficult to allow herself to think it might be possible that all this might be finally coming to an end. Grace wanted to have hope, she wanted to see a light at the end of the darkness, but even if the threat was eliminated, the chance her mother would die still hung over her. Aside from that, she'd need to learn how to coexist with Abnur *without* having some sort of *thing* like this holding it together. How had tragedy and fear become some sort of glue? Would there be anything holding it together without the glue? Was there something else that was the glue?

Such thinking needed to be set aside for now; the present pressing matter at hand was to find Hester. Fortunately, Decir's quick thinking had kept Grace from revealing her presence when she'd spotted the former maid from across the square. There was yet the element of surprise to her advantage. Hester would have to be incredibly stupid, though, to think she was safe there. Or anywhere. The whole thing seemed nonsensical, but perhaps that's because no one had wiped out Grace's family; she couldn't understand the devastation such a thing must have caused.

There was an address one of Decir's associates had noted seeing Hester visit several times since her arrival, so it was near there that Grace prowled amongst vendor stalls. She carefully shielded her face and made sure to look only as suspicious as the rest of the prowling people did. It was Anvil, a place full of thieves and pirates, so nearly everyone looked like they were up to something. It was handy for spying, but less ideal for maintaining possession of one's coin purse.

Grace was distracted for a moment by another fight breaking out at the tavern a block or so down, and when her attention returned to the house she watched, she caught Hester's slight form dashing inside. *Damn it!* The house itself was nondescript, and the back and side yards were enclosed by a stone wall. It was much too high to see over, and Grace slipped between the wall and the neighboring house. The space was narrow enough, and it allowed for easy shimmying up to peer over, though she didn't expect to see much.

Inside the walls was an elaborate garden. In one area, it looked as if a group of children was in the midst of instruction and others milled about or played. It was a *school*, what in the bloody fuck was Hester doing at a school?

With the sun still high in the sky, it was impossible to see into the windows of the building, but the necessity of looking in vanished as a prim school matron emerged from a back door, Hester at her side, looking grim. It was the expression carrying the resignation to one's own death. Grace had seen the look on the faces of the condemned in the past. The matron said something, gesturing toward the garden, and Hester nodded. She was left alone, standing in the garden amongst the children that appeared not to notice her for a long moment before starting in Grace's direction.

Grace ducked, still holding herself up between the garden wall and the building next door, keeping still before cautiously peering over again. Two children under the age of ten broke free from the group they were playing with, running to Hester's side, hugging her.

"*Fuck.*" It popped out unbidden. Hester's head snapped up, and Grace fell from the wall, landing flat on her back, the wind knocked from her lungs. *Fuck*, indeed. When she was finally able to drag in a ragged breath, she got to her feet, brushing off the dirt and bits of leaf and twig clinging to her. So much for the element of surprise. She sighed and went back out front, curious if Hester would

emerge or find some other way to escape.

Nearly an hour ticked by at a snail's pace before the front door of the school opened. Out stepped Hester, her face wan, eyes darting around as though expecting a squadron of guards to appear and seize her. There was fear in her eyes as she approached Grace.

"Please, not in public." It was a pleading whisper.

"Amidst all your lies and deception, I didn't think I had shown myself as a monster to you." It seemed as though it shouldn't have taken so much effort to keep from taking someone's life, but as pitiful as her former maid tried to look, it made no difference. The desire to spill the woman's blood still thrummed through her.

"You were always kind to me..."

"And here I am, about to *graciously* put you in front of the person responsible for the murder of your father and brothers." Grace pinned her with a cold, steely glare.

"Tharn?"

"No. He had no feud with your family, nor did he have a desire to needlessly slaughter Imperial subjects." A knot twisted in Grace's gut. "I didn't know you had children."

"They are my eldest brother's children. They lost both their parents the same day, and my mother was caring for them until she died, too. I am *all* they have."

Grace started down the street. "Then why would you do something as foolish as waging war on Abnur Tharn?" Her jaw clenched and unclenched as they walked. "If there was nothing in place for them to be cared for in the event of your death, why do something that most *certainly* would ensure your death?"

"It was *murder*, I couldn't let it go unpunished. Dozens of lives were affected by what happened. I lost my entire family, other families lost their loved ones who were aboard that ship. How is it fair that such a travesty be overlooked?"

"You became the very thing you hate, Hester." The words were like knives. "You decided to make me and those I care about collateral damage, disregarding the lives of others as freely as those who wronged you. Tell me, how does that make things better? Do you feel better? Did seeing my face beaten bloody and slipping a blade into my mother's neck make you feel *good*?"

"It *wasn't* personal."

"How is that better? It's personal for *me*." As they turned down an alley, Grace grabbed Hester by the throat, slamming her back against the stone wall. "What did my mother do that could possibly have merited stabbing, hm?"

"She caught me going through her things." Hester struggled to get the words out as her air supply dwindled.

"A clever lie wouldn't suffice?" Grace hissed. "No, instead, you decided..." She grunted as Hester brought her knee up hard, landing squarely between her legs. Grace dropped like a stone. Balls weren't necessary to suffer from such an assault. Lights seemed to flash in her eyes for a second, the sound of running footsteps getting quieter.

With a snarl, ignoring the pain, Grace got to her feet, hurtling in the same direction Hester had. The

foolish bitch seemed not to understand the training battemages went through, and it was no difficult thing to track the remnants of magic so recently left behind.

She displaced, quickly gaining ground, and ahead of her, Hester darted down another alley. Was she panicking? Was that why she was so foolishly running directly where Grace had intended to take her anyway?

Turning down the alley, Grace displaced yet again, only a short distance behind her quarry as they neared the warehouse. She unleashed a blast that hit Hester square in the back, throwing her against the wall beside her, and she crumpled to the ground. A large door slid open as Grace came to a halt. Decir stepped out, but she ignored him, grabbing the back of Hester's coat and tossing her with ease against the opposite wall where she stood, dazed for a long moment. The edges of Grace's vision seemed to turn red as she struck Hester hard across the face with her fist, a small spray of blood smattering on the wall as her head snapped back.

"Milady..." Decir started, but it was Abnur who appeared out of nowhere, stepping between Grace and the woman she was very ready to beat to death. He took her by the shoulders as she clenched and unclenched her teeth.

"Don't deviate from the plan, Grace." His voice was low. "You cannot kill her in the street."

"I am aware." She practically bared her teeth at him before shoving by, grabbing Hester by the front of her jacket and shoving her hard into the warehouse. All Grace could see in her mind's eye was her mother lying on the floor in a pool of her own blood.

Inside the warehouse, tied to a chair, was a badly beaten man that could only be the one whose actions spurred the insanity that had taken place in the last month. Hester stared at him as she slowly got to her feet again, recognition in her eyes.

"Burlis." Her lips twisted into a disgusted sneer.

"You know one another already, good." Grace folded her arms, glancing at Decir, who gave the chair a kick.

"What did you just tell us?" The demand was stern and cold.

"It was me." Burlis spat a little blood onto the floor, glaring into space. Decir struck him hard across the face.

"And?"

"I was not under orders to kill Galanis and his sons. I hated him. I enjoyed it." The captive bared his bloody teeth. His lip was split, and his nose was definitely broken.

"Enjoyed it?" Hester's voice was shaking, tears in her eyes. "They were innocent...you orphaned children, took husbands from their wives...*ruined* my family...my life. For a grudge." At that, Grace glanced at Abnur, who arched a brow at her. The irony was not lost on him either.

"Your father and brothers were self-righteous bastards who refused to accept change." Burlis spit again, and Hester was shaking, the rage plain on her face. Decir handed Grace a dagger, and she promptly passed it to Hester, curious how she'd react.

There wasn't even the slightest hesitation, and before Burlis could utter one more word to mock the woman's pain and grief, she had cut his throat ear to ear and stared at the surprise on his face, watching the blood pour down his chest.

It didn't take long, and when Burlis had gurgled his last, Hester threw down the dagger, wilting. She'd done what she'd set out to do. Grace steeled herself because now it was her turn to do what she'd set out to do.

"Why did you let me kill him?" Hester's voice was barely above a whisper.

"I could tell you it was out of the kindness of my heart, but really it's more of a two-birds-with-one-stone sort of deal. With a little mercy peppered on top." Grace pinned her with a hard stare. For all her anger and rage at this woman and all of the things she had done, Grace didn't want to have to do this. But after everything that had happened, there was no other option.

"Thank you." Hester looked up at her with glassy eyes, surprisingly without pleading in her gaze. Again, it was the grim acceptance of death. "For what it's worth, I am sorry for the harm that befell you and yours at my hand...you never deserved it."

"It is worth little...but appreciated nonetheless." Grace was afraid Hester would beg and fall to cowardice and crying, but though tears rolled down her cheeks, she made no plea for her life.

"The children are innocent." Hester struggled to school her face. "I said my goodbyes and left the matron with enough gold to last them two more months at the school. It was all I had..."

"They will not suffer for your sins."

"Thank you. Then I am ready, whatever the pain." Hester's jaw clenched and unclenched, trying to remain steady, but she trembled with the fear of the greatest of unknowns. Grace put her hand on Hester's shoulder, their gazes locked.

"No pain." She whispered.

"Wha—"

Grace drove the mage blade upward quickly and with force, piercing the heart. Hester blinked once before the light in her eyes flickered out. Her knees buckled, and Grace caught her under the arms, putting her carefully on the ground, unable to pull her eyes away from the lifeless face.

"You *were* my friend." She kept her face turned from the others so they wouldn't see, though she knew no one would say anything, not even Abnur. Her friends had been so few and far between all her life, whatever the circumstances, it hurt to lose one.

Juri had still not woken by the time Grace, and Abnur returned to the White-Gold Tower. Quietly and by herself, she cleaned up, destroying the clothes that had Hester's blood on them. She sat in the bath and wept until the water was cold. The reasons were many. Hester. Her mother. Relief that it was all finally done. Grief. Regret.

There was unfinished business, though, and with the threat truly eliminated, Grace slipped out of the palace alone, cloaked, and moving quietly along unnoticed as she had done before. It helped that it was evening, and people were sparse as she ventured into one of the less-ideal sections of the city, coming at last to the desired address. It wasn't a slum, but it certainly wasn't luxurious. Putting her hood back, Grace knocked. After a long moment, she heard a bolt slide, a chain, and then, finally, the door opened a crack. Emedia looked out, then seeing who it was, opened the door further.

"It's done, then?" She asked, glancing behind her into the house.

“It is. At least until whatever comes next.” Grace let out a long breath and shook her head.

“Well, *you’ve* made your bed...” Emedia cast her a wry glance.

“I know, I know.”

“What are you here for, then?”

“Abnur is speaking with Clivia, and I imagine the threat to your own life will recede as well, if you’re willing to accept a proposition.”

“Let me guess, leave the city and never show my face again?” Emedia folded her arms and scoffed, bitterness twisting her beautiful features.

“No, actually. May I come in?”

“Um...alright.” Her eyes were wide with surprise, but she opened the door farther to let Grace in, then closed it behind her. “The children are in bed. Come, I’ve got tea.”

“How hospitable.”

“I don’t have to like you to be grateful that you might play some part in that psychotic bitch of an empress *not* coming after me.” Emedia snapped.

They sat at a small table in the kitchen, quiet for a long time as the tea steeped. Grace was exhausted, but this wasn’t something that could wait. Abnur had been shockingly receptive to her idea, which made things much easier. He could be trusted to rein in his horrible daughter.

“So, this proposition?” Emedia spoke first.

“Yes.” Grace nodded. “Do you love your children?”

Suspicion was alight in the bright blue eyes at once. “Yes, of course. More than anything.”

“Do you think you could love children that aren’t yours?”

“What?” Emedia frowned.

Grace recounted, at length, what had happened in Anvil. When she was done, there was another long stretch of silence. Grace sipped her tea while Emedia let it sink in.

“You’re...sitting in *this* house...in *this* ward of the city...asking me to take care of two *more* children?” There was a flash of anger in her eyes. “Of all the presumptuous, aristocratic, cunt-rag bullshit to...”

“Reign in your hatred for a minute, Emedia. For *fuck’s* sake.” Grace rolled her eyes. “Truly, what sort of a heinous person do you think I am? What did I ever actually *do* to you?”

“I don’t even have an actual reason anymore, besides I suppose you attacking me in the Imperial Library and throwing me in a dungeon.”

“It kept you alive, didn’t it?”

“Fine...I assume you’re going to make me some sort of offer in addition to the time, attention, and expense of doubling my number of children?” Emedia harrumphed and folded her arms.

“Yes.” Grace sighed. “If you accept, you will be granted a title and paperwork legitimizing your children by a fabricated dead husband regardless of who fathered them. Also, a home more suited for a person of that title, as well as a monthly stipend for the upkeep of all four children, yourself, and your new home.” It was more than a little satisfying to see the complete and utter shock on Emedia’s face. Whatever she’d been expecting, this wasn’t it.

“A-all that...for taking care of two orphans?”

“Well, there are a couple small stipulations, but I don’t imagine you’ll have much issue with them. You may continue your work in the archives if you wish, but you are *not* to see Leovic again. Your ambitions to be an empress must die, or you will lose everything, most likely, even your life if Clivia has anything to do with it.”

“I...” Emedia wrestled with it only very briefly. “Alright. Seems by giving that up, I get everything I want anyway. What else?”

“These children need love and care, they have lost everything and everyone they ever loved. You must truly accept them into your home and your heart, Emedia. You cannot...”

“Now who thinks *who* is a monster, Gratiaren?” Emedia narrowed her eyes. “I love my children, and I give them all the love they need and more. Just because I’m a bitch to you doesn’t mean I’d ever mistreat children.”

“Well, good.” Grace shifted a little and then slumped in her chair. “I just...I’m tired. Of everything. Today I had to execute one of the only real friends I ever had, and I promised her those children wouldn’t suffer for what she did.”

“I suspect you have more friends than you know, but you’re too bloody obtuse to look past your own nose to see them!” Emedia huffed. “I *will* give them a happy home. And understand that I recognize the expense you’re taking upon yourself to ensure that. I agree to the terms. My children and those ones will all grow and thrive.” She paused. “What if I remarry?”

“Nothing changes.” Grace shrugged. “Why should you not have your own money?”

“I do rather like not being tied down.”

“I’m glad then, that we are in agreement. The children have three more weeks until the end of their current term. Everything will be arranged in the meantime.” Grace rose to her feet, feeling a burden lifted from her shoulders. *Now* she could go back to Abnur’s apartments and go to sleep for presumably what would feel like nine years to recharge and regain her energy.

Though it was getting late, Abnur was meeting with several advisors in his study when she returned. Quietly, she stood in the open doorway, and he glanced up, the question on his face. She gave him a nod, and he looked pleased before turning back to the advisors. She was well beyond ready for the day to end, it was difficult to keep her eyes open even as she changed into her nightshirt, and crawled into bed.

It felt as though four entire minutes had passed when there was sudden pounding on the bedchamber door. As Abnur was asleep beside her, Grace knew it had been at least a few hours. She rubbed her eyes, and Abnur sat bolt upright, lighting the lamps with a gesture. Snatching up a dressing gown, he donned it and went to the door. Grace stared sleepily after him and then heard Nevalo’s voice.

“Juri is awake.”

Topal Bay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

9th of Sun's Dusk

She looked...younger. Juri was sitting up on the high, canopied bed peering groggily at those around her. A recently woken Avise stood nearby, rubbing her eyes, and Nevalo looked overjoyed. Grace stared at her mother, Abnur close at her back. When had healing grown powerful enough to make someone *younger*? Well, Abnur was shockingly long-lived for a human, but his means of attaining long-life were quite a bit different from anything Juri might have been exposed to.

"What happened? Why is everyone in here?" Juri frowned a little, covering her mouth as she yawned, wincing a little from stiff muscles.

"You don't remember?" Grace moved toward her and sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes not leaving her mother's unexpectedly youthful face. It didn't seem real at first, to find that Juri, after everything, was alive and well. The lines at the corners of her eyes had smoothed. In fact, she looked hardly older than Grace.

"No..."

"You were attacked. You've been unconscious for days."

"I don't remember anyone attacking me." Juri blinked, her grogginess quickly evolving to concern.

"That's probably for the best."

"Why?" Her mother frowned.

"Well, you were stabbed in the neck. I assume such a memory would be very traumatic." Grace could see the scar, and it was smaller and fainter than she thought it should be. It wouldn't even need to be strategically covered, as it could easily pass for a birthmark even.

"By *whom*?"

"It doesn't matter. That person was...apprehended." Grace explained, hoping that she wouldn't need to go into detail.

"You mean *killed*." It wasn't a question, and Juri narrowed her eyes a little at her daughter.

"Yes, I do." There was a long pause as she waited for whatever barrage of moral disputing to get hurled at her, but Juri merely shook her head.

"I ought to be angry." She spoke very quietly. "That you would take a life, but..."

"But you're my mother, and I won't stand for violence against my loved-ones. Even if they *are* neurotic and frustrating." A small smile crossed Grace's lips as one corner of Juri's mouth tugged upward.

"I haven't made very much easy for you, I know, because of my own fears. But I know that you're

good and kind as I always wanted you to be. But sometimes goodness and kindness aren't enough, though, and you have the strength to do what needs to be done." Juri had never been so frank and open with her thoughts and feelings before. Grace fought to grasp a worthy response, but her mother glanced toward the door where Abnur stood, for once without utter contempt. "If you've managed to show *that* man what it means to love, then I daresay there is very little you cannot do."

"Oh, mum, I..." Still, she was at a loss for words and came dangerously close to going to pieces when Juri took her hands.

"You haven't called me that since you were a little girl." A grin bloomed on her mother's face. "I am pleased you're not as devoid of sentiment as you might have the world believe."

"Yes, well...it's been a trying few days. Anyone might be hard-pressed to keep their wayward emotions under wraps at such a time." Grace cleared her throat a little, doing everything possible not to look at Abnur.

"How are you feeling, Juri?" Nevalo interrupted, and Juri looked up at him with bright blue eyes. "Any pain? Headache?" The mask she'd worn for all Grace's life was stripped away, and she suspected that there was a great deal to learn about her mother that had been shut away all these years. Grace stood, getting out of the way so her father could sit down.

"I feel quite well, of course...besides having a room full of people staring at me in my nightclothes." Juri gave a shrug.

"I want to get married." Nevalo took her hands, and Grace glanced at Abnur, who motioned toward the door with his head. Whatever came next was nothing anyone would want to be present for.

"Let's speak in the hallway," Grace told Avise, who nodded, and they exited.

"She seems entirely well..." Avise started.

"She looks at least a decade younger; how did that happen?" Grace's voice was hushed.

"I don't know, I assumed it was you, it started before the doctor even got to her."

"It wasn't anything I did on purpose. Certainly, it is a strange side effect, which I think ought to be monitored for a while. Is Dr. Dexitullian coming tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course, I'll be sure to tell him."

"Good. Get some rest. I feel like *I* could sleep for a week!"

Grace stood by their bed, just looking at it for a long moment. Everything was *resolved*, more or less. The threat against her was gone. Her mother was alive and well. Even whatever nonsense that existed between her and Emedia was laid to rest, for the most part anyway. All that was left to deal with was Abnur. She idly traced a pattern on the coverlet with one finger as the door in the sitting room clicked shut, and he came in. The thought of going away for a while with him was more appealing than ever. Did he even *know* how to relax?

"I expected you to be out cold already." He came up behind her, and she turned to face him. It was obvious he was assessing her mood, trying to determine if she was upset or happy...or what. And honestly, even she wasn't entirely sure.

“I suppose with everything sorted out, there’s nothing left to do but go back to researching and writing my papers.” She watched his eyes, their icy blue always so bright, so astute.

“You’re not pleased?”

“I’m very relieved that the worry is done with. I suppose I’m wondering what chaos is going to rear its head next.” Grace stepped closer, letting her hands rest on his chest. Not much had passed between them since the day Juri had been attacked.

“I imagine there are ruins you’ve yet to be nearly incinerated in. Curating. Study. Whatever other scholarly pursuits pique your varying interests and erratic attention span.”

“Erratic attention span?” She scoffed, giving him a small shove. “How can you even say that?” She smirked. “I’ve been paying attention to *you* for twenty years.”

“Some things are just more worthy of attention than others.” Abnur shrugged.

“Ah, there is that shining humility of yours.” She shook her head, starting to feel sleepy again, and sat on the edge of the bed. “What are your grand plans, then?”

“I’ve got something in mind.” He caught the hem of her nightshirt, sliding it up over her knees, and her eyes widened.

“Is that so? Well, it’s quite late, and I’m rather tired, but I’m willing if you are.” Grace pulled him closer, but Abnur stopped just short of her mouth, his lips close to hers.

“Oh, that’s not what I meant. In that case, though, I’ve got two things in mind.”

16th of Evening Star – Five Weeks Later

The warm, salty breeze rippled gently through the entire seaside manor. It carried with it the sweet scent of blossoming flowers and the sound of waves against rocks. Sunlight glittered on the turquoise bay, and Grace stood at the balcony rail outside the bedchamber, looking out at it. The Topal Bay was stunning, and it was so magnificently different from everything else in central Cyrodiil. She wore only a sheer robe and nothing else, the heat was enough that little else was necessary. She’d donned it shortly after their arrival that morning and had spent some time basking in the sun and napping.

Abnur, despite his claims that this was a vacation that would relieve him of his need to attend to political business, had a number of allegedly unavoidable things to take care of, and had left her to her own devices for most of the day. At least once he was done, there were four weeks in which neither of them was required anywhere for anything. If emergencies could be sufficiently mitigated by the rest of the Council for that time, then there would be peace and relaxation.

Grace didn’t flinch when she felt his fingertips on her hips, sliding around her waist as he drew up close. She smiled to herself, putting her hands over top of his. Abnur’s lips pressed against the nape of her neck, sending a small chill through her.

“Business concluded?” She murmured, leaning back against him.

“At long last, yes. For the foreseeable future, all that makes demands on my time is a wanton tart.”

“Sounds *terrible*.” Grace turned around, draping her arms around his neck. Even he had embraced the tropical climate, donning a simple, light tunic and sandals. “Do you think you’re even capable of sitting still for four weeks?”

“I have *no* intention of sitting still.”

“Besides that.”

“I will alleviate my urges to work by answering daily correspondence. Sufficient threats of disembowelment have been issued to ensure there will be no interruptions outside of an actual catastrophic Empire-ending event.” He leaned close. “And you, you horrible woman, have been lying about all day torturing me by your very existence.” He tugged the edge of the gossamer fabric draped around her.

“I’m not even a little bit sorry.”

“I’d be disappointed if you were.” He kissed her, long and deep, and the embrace indeed elicited the desired effect as she pressed against him.

With the last remaining shred of her self-control, Grace stepped away from Abnur, moving toward the large open doors that led to the bedchamber. Sheer white drapes billowed in the breeze. He watched her as she held out her hand to him, then took it, allowing her to lead him inside. It was strangely intimate, the touching of hands, and not something she recalled often doing with him. Those long fingers wrapped around hers, the heat of their palms, pressing together.

“Hm.” Abnur made an intrigued sort of sound.

“What?” They were standing beside the large, canopied bed, and he smirked.

“Interesting what strange little things get you hot and bothered.”

“Seems you don’t know *everything* about me, after all.” Grace shrugged a shoulder.

“Not yet.” He gave the simple cord at her waist a quick tug, then pushed the fabric to the floor.

“Get on the bed.”

“Bossy.” Grace grinned, but complied, sitting on the edge. There was a devious look in his eyes as he took her by the waist and pushed her back a little before drawing her knees apart. He kissed her on the mouth again, but teased her, only flicking his tongue against hers and lightly biting her lower lip.

“I believe that a while back, I made a promise I hadn’t gotten around to keeping.” He pulled back and pressed the tips of his index and middle fingers to her lips. “Suck.” She did, wondering which promise he was referring to. Grace took his hand, though, by the wrist, and with her eyes on his, did to his fingers what she fully intended to do with a different appendage. Abnur’s mouth dropped open a little as he watched, that darkening look of intent filling his eyes.

Suddenly, he took his fingers from her mouth and slipped them inside her. She gasped, clenching a little, and leaned back onto her elbows, spreading her thighs wide. Her eyes were fixed on him, and he bent over her, his mouth descending. When his lips and tongue met with her ready flesh, her hips lifted a little, and he slung one leg over his shoulder. Abnur’s beard rasped against her skin,

heightening the sensation. Hands gripping his hair, Grace's breath came faster as she moved against his mouth.

He knew just what to do so that she reached her peak, and she did, her hips bucking against him as she cried out, but he didn't relent until she went limp altogether. He rose up, wiping his mouth, looking self-satisfied, and began unfastening his sash.

"Yes. Take that bloody tunic *off*." She panted. "I can't believe you're wearing *sandals*." With a grin, she wriggled up to lie on the pillows. Once undressed, Abnur got onto the bed, climbing onto her, kissing her neck. Deftly, she rolled him onto his back, and he stared up, brows arched high.

"What a pleasant surprise. I don't have to do *all* the work for once?"

"Bullshit, Abnur, I've had you on your back more than you've had me on mine." Grace scoffed and shifted, taking him in with a pleased groan. His eyes rolled back a little, and she loved when that happened. Her fingers trailed through the hair on his chest before she braced herself and moved in that way that made his toes curl. Abnur's head lolled back, and he moaned aloud, the sort of sound one would never expect to hear from the Grand Chancellor, his fingers digging into her hips.

They'd been so exhausted the night before that they'd barely made it through a quick romp before passing out. There was no such trouble now. Grace reached back behind her, between his legs, stroking, and massaging.

"N-no, I'll come off too soon..." Abnur sat up and grabbed her wrists before putting her on her back and pinning them on either side of her head. His eyes were fixed on hers as he moved inside her, and she listened to the sound of his breath. She'd long stopped denying the degree of importance he had in her life. The last months had been insane, but she never would have thought she'd end up here for this reason...of all reasons.

He kissed her, releasing her wrists and Grace put her arms around him, closing her eyes, overwhelmed by everything, but also gladly succumbing to it all. Her life had been a privileged existence full of pleasure and the freedom to do as she liked. Maybe now she would find the direction she never realized she needed.

"I will admit, it wasn't as nauseating as I had expected." Abnur was staring upward, one arm behind his head, the other around Grace as she lay pressed against his side, her head on his shoulder.

"Truly, your praise of my sexual prowess is so life-affirming, Abnur."

"*Yesterday*." He rolled his eyes.

"What, the ceremony? It *was* short and to the point." She nodded, recalling the extremely abbreviated pomp and circumstance everyone had been forced to endure. "I don't remember the last time I saw my mother so happy. Even Silero and my nan were pleased. Well, despite..."

"Despite what?"

"Despite the obvious. How tongues will wag." She chuckled. "I do prefer the smaller, less showy ordeals. I've been dragged to my fair share of Nibenese weddings. Ugh, they were always so

terrible. That's part of what always deterred me, you know." She wriggled, turning over to look at his face. Abnur gave her a sidelong glance.

"Here I thought it was just stubbornness."

"That probably had something to do with it, too." The grin stuck to her face widened.

"Speaking of your stubbornness..." Nothing good could come from such a segue, and Grace mentally braced herself. "Silero did agree to abdicate his seat on the Elder Council in favor of you taking it."

"*What?*" That wasn't what she'd anticipated, and propped herself up a little to look Abnur directly in the eye. "I *told* you I didn't want you to speak to him about it."

"Would you believe that it was his idea?"

"No. I would believe you led him into the conversation and made it seem like it was his idea, you snake." She made a frustrated noise, rolling her eyes.

"Unroll your eyes. The paperwork is already completed." It wasn't really a surprise that he'd gone ahead with that particular plan. "Though, it's only valid with your signature agreeing to replace him on the Council. It must be a Tiradia in that seat." Somehow, his smugness actually intensified and Grace gave him a dirty look.

"I should have known you'd find a way to corner me into it. The Council isn't going to like it. I know for a fact that they felt more secure knowing that my grandfather doesn't agree with you on everything. If I'm in that seat, they're going to think I'll vote your way no matter what!" With a sigh, she flopped back down.

"Please. You're more combative toward me than he's *ever* been. I'm sure they'll realize in no time that I've made more trouble for myself than anything."

"Oh, yes, trouble. That much is for certain. I will not go quietly into that gods-damned seat, Abnur."

"Considering your inability to go quietly into anything, I didn't think you would."

"*Why* the fuck are we talking about this *now*? There isn't supposed to be any business discussion for the next four weeks."

"I'd thought perhaps you'd be more amiable to it after a good go-around." He gave a snort, unable to even say it with a straight face.

"You're an ass."

"Is that the best you've got?"

"I wouldn't want to hurt your feelings. You're stuck with me now, so..."

"Well..." He turned onto his side, facing her, looking pleased with himself. "I guess I've made my bed."

"We'll see how long before you regret having to sleep in it."

"I doubt I'll be the one with regrets." He kissed her, then, and against her better judgement, she reciprocated, growing warmer as he moved atop her again.

“So, is this what we’re to do for the next four weeks?”

“Is that not what’s expected?” Abnur arched a brow.

“It’s a shame we can’t stay here longer.” Grace sighed. “But I suppose I would never hear the end of it if I wasn’t back in time for my parents’ wedding. At least theirs will be an even smaller affair.”

Chapter End Notes

I want to say thank you so much to all of you who read this!!

It's not the end for Abnur and Gratiaren, considering how interesting and dicey things will get when it comes time to give Leovic the boot!!

We all know that crotchety battlemage gets himself into more trouble in the subsequent years!!!

<3 <3 <3 <3

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